L. McManus

THE RED STAR

THE AUTONYM LIBRARY

THE AUTONYM LIBRARY.

Small works by representative writers, whose contributions will bear their signatures.

32mo, limp cloth, each 50 cents.

The Autonym Library is published in co-operation with Mr. T. Fisher Unwin, of London.

I. THE UPPER BERTH, by F. Marion Crawford.

II. FOUND AND LOST, by Mary Putnam-Jacobi.

III. THE DOCTOR, HIS WIFE, AND THE CLOCK, by Anna Katharine Green.

IV. THE HONOUR OF THE FLAG, by W. Clark Russell.

V. THE RED STAR, by L. McManus.

These will be followed by volumes by other well-known writers.

L. McManus

THE RED STAR

BY

L. McMANUS

AUTHOR OF "AMABEL, A MILITARY ROMANCE"

"Mars in the eighth House, the House of Death portends disasters by war."

Grammar of Astrology.

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

NEW YORK
27 West Twenty-third Street

LONDON
24 Bedford Street, Strand

The Knickerbocker Press

1895

The Knickerbocker Press, New Rochelle, N. Y.

THIS STORY
TO THE MEMORY OF

ARTHUR CORRIGAN McMANUS

VICTORIAN RANGERS, COLONIAL FORCES
WHO DIED AT ECHUCA, VICTORIA,
DECEMBER 2D, 1894,

"When the stars threw down their spears."

THE RED STAR.

The Red Star.

I.

IT was in the autumn of 1806 that Captain Basil Pahlen, of the Russian Imperial Guards, rode out of General Benningsen's cantonments to be married to the Countess Halka Mnizek. He went unwillingly, regretting his fate, and felt himself the victim of untoward circumstances and the whim of others. His betrothal had taken place before the Austrian campaign in the previous year in the presence of the Emperor, the bride being a Polish girl whom he had never seen till that hour. He had strong personal reasons for not wishing to go through the ceremony, and these rose so vividly before him as he went along the broken track that answered for a road, that to his

fancy they acquired body and form, and, flitting at his horse's head, kept their warning eyes upon his face.

The sun had just set, and the topmost needles of the pine-tree on his right had caught the after-glow. The skeleton of a horse lying by the roadside had also taken a rosy tint. A crow sat on the skull driving its beak into one of the eye sockets. Wolves as well as carrion birds had helped to clean its bones ; and he had seen a grey form steal in among the pines as he had ridden up.

Drawing a letter from his sabretache, he read it slowly through. It bore the address, *Count Pahlen*, and was written in red ink, the crabbed writing in parts being all but illegible.

Basil Vassiliévitch, it ran, *His Majesty the Tzar hath given me leave and doth order that your marriage with the Countess Halka Mnizek shall take place at whatsoever hour or day I may deem necessary. Therefore, having at this time several powerful and urgent*

reasons for knowing that the time for fulfilment has come, I command you to hasten to my house—an Imperial order having been sent to General Benningsen to permit your departure from the camp —that the will of all concerned in this matter may be carried out. Haste, haste, and delay not.

Count Adam Mnizek.

The words looked as if they had been written in blood as the red ink caught the fast fading glow. A fancy seized him. He sprang to the ground, and, wrapping the letter round a stone, flung it into a pool of water by the side of the road. It sank among the starwort, and a frog leapt out of the stagnant water to the reeds on the bank. He felt by the act as if he had drowned and hidden out of sight something that was hateful and a menace to his liberty.

Swinging across his horse, he rode into the twilight, with a hard, set look in his eyes. He was twenty-five, and liked the draught of life he had drunk ; but now there was gall in

the cup, and his own deed had been his undoing.

The road he followed wound through plains of trampled oats or dense woods. When the weather changed and the rain fell it would be as muddy and impassable as the fields themselves. Ruts like gashes cut across the way, full of fallen leaves; and as he guided his horse by one of the worst he saw a group of men standing near the edge of the wood. All appeared to be peasants, with the exception of a man on horseback, who rode armed, and under whose cloak the glitter of gold embroidery could be seen. His voice was raised and angry as he spoke to the serfs.

Pahlen caught the answer of a peasant as he rode nearer to the trees.

"Highness," the man said, doggedly, "our minds are made up. Not one in the province will take up arms unless we have a Mnizek to lead us. If his high excellency rides to the war we will follow him."

"You cowards and dogs!" cried the horseman. "Do you expect the half-mad old man who owns you to lead you to battle?"

"Without his excellency's word we will not rise. If a Mnizek orders us to risk our necks we shall obey," answered the peasant, stolidly.

"Then a Mnizek shall lead you, dogs! If you are not at the point I have told you of by the third day you shall be hung, and your wives and children shall have their homes burnt over their heads when we ride by."

"We hear your high nobility," said the serf, in a more abject tone, "and if a Mnizek is there we will follow him, as our duty is."

The horseman wheeled round suddenly at the sound of hoofs, and found himself face to face with Pahlen. His companions looked alarmed, and drew closer together. The sight of the Russian's uniform froze their blood, and one by one they gradually slunk into the wood.

Pahlen rode slowly up, returning the man's stare. He guessed at once that he was one of the emissaries of Prince Poniatowski, who since the approach of the French had been trying to raise regiments among his countrymen to help Napoleon.

As Pahlen ordered him to halt he backed his horse into the wood, and, with a defiant flourish of his hand, disappeared among the trees. Night by this time had fallen, and, as the wood was deep, the officer knew that it would be useless to follow him.

The incident diverted his thoughts. The girl to whom he was to be married that night bore the name that alone had power to stir the serfs from their apathy. If by the mercy of devil or saint a Mnizek joined the French the whole family would fall into disgrace, and, if the marriage were delayed, she would not be forced upon him. But how delay it? Fate rode apace, and within two hours she would be considered his wife.

Twenty minutes later he passed

through the gateway leading to Count Mnizek's mansion, and walked his horse up an avenue deep in shadows. Again and again he cursed the necessity that compelled him to go through the wedding ceremony. One loophole of escape, indeed, he was aware was open to him; but if he used it he would have to face the wrath of his master and his own disgrace.

He tried to silence his conscience by recalling the resolution that he had taken. There was a risk attached to it that placed it among the uncertainties of his life, for the mood of a girl was to settle his future. It was with grim satisfaction he realised this. He felt as if he had made atonement to his injured honour.

Drawing rein before the great, rambling buildings in which the Mnizeks for two hundred years had dispensed their hospitality to other great nobles and had received their kings, he knocked at a door, and soon after he was admitted into the house.

A servant led him across a large,

lighted hall to a room where an old man in a black velvet suit was sitting, tapping his fingers impatiently on a table by his side. A bottle of *wodhi* with some richly cut glasses stood near his elbow. Two fang-like teeth that hung over his under-lip gave him an animal look; his closely set eyes peered up at the young man as he came forward.

"It is well, Basil Vassiliévitch, that you have obeyed my summons," he said, rising to greet Pahlen. "The times grow worse and worse," he added, after he had embraced him, "and I wish to place Countess Halka in safety."

"And pray what am I to do with a wife in the war?" said Pahlen, twirling his moustache and looking at the floor.

"You will send her into Russia, of course," replied the old man. "And I must remark, Count Basil, upon the strange reluctance you have shown to the marriage being completed. Three times I have wished it to take place, and you have

been ready with an excuse on each occasion. And even now it has required an Imperial order to make you keep your promise. The Tzar has been gracious enough to allow the marriage to take place in the Holy Catholic Church, though you were betrothed in the Greek, in consideration of the bride's faith and the dangers of the times which have made it impossible for you to return to Russia."

"His Majesty——" began Pahlen, still looking down, but the Count interrupted him.

"His Majesty is much interested in the marriage," he said. "I have a letter here from Prince Volkhonsky in answer to my petition to the Tzar that it might not be delayed. He says, *For the sake of his late Minister of War, Count Pahlen, father of the bridegroom, His Majesty is most anxious that this alliance should take place. As to the reluctance which you hint Basil Vassiliévitch has shown, I may add on this point that he will incur the serious displeasure of the Tzar if he breaks his*

troth and the solemn oath he swore in His Majesty's presence. The warning cannot be stronger, young man."

"For God's sake get it over, then!" said Pahlen, rising to his feet, his sword and spurs clanking and jingling in the impatience of his movement.

"In the name of God, I will," answered the Count, getting up briskly from his chair. "Follow me."

He led the way from the room and across the hall, pausing suddenly in a long corridor to fix a curious, searching gaze on Pahlen's face.

"There is danger," he said, impressively, pointing a lean, yellow finger, like the leg of a crow, in the direction where the chapel lay.

Pahlen could have groaned. He knew that well enough, without this old fool reminding him of it, he thought. But his fear and Count Adam Mnizek's, he was aware, were most certainly not the same. He did not, however, show his discomposure as he asked—

"From the French?"

"Ah!" cried the old man, eagerly. "Yes, that is it! From the French."

Pahlen had not expected this reply; he had put the question as the first that had occurred to him. Standing tall and erect in his white uniform of the horse guards, he looked down with absent, uninterested eyes at the crooked, lean old Pole.

"They want me—me, a feeble old man near my end, to—to, ah, yes—to lead them. Lead them against what? Ha, ha! the knout and the rope and Siberia."

A gleam of interest flashed suddenly into Pahlen's eyes.

"And you will?" he demanded, quickly.

The Count grinned. "As soon as I would to hell?" he replied, and moved on.

But when they reached the door leading into the chapel he paused again to hint his fears, combing the long hairs of his white beard with his fingers, and stuttering in his excitement.

"Young man, take care of your bride," he said. "She and I are the last of our name. She thinks the French a great race, and Napoleon the saviour of oppressed nations. She forgets that God Himself will not be strong enough to save us from *you* when they have recrossed the Vistula."

"When they have!" said Pahlen, with cold indifference.

The Count appeared about to speak again; then, with nervous haste, flung the door wide open and entered the chapel.

Tidings of the bridegroom's arrival had been brought to the group of persons assembled there. The priest stood by the altar, and the witnesses —servants of the household and an official from the village—were already in their places.

While Pahlen went slowly up the nave, the Count passed out by a side door, returning almost immediately with a girl veiled and in white, whom he led to the altar.

The guardsman's eyes rested steadily, even defiantly, upon her, the

bride whom he had not chosen, in whose hands his fate was lying. The beams of a lamp fell on her figure, giving her veil a sheeny, dazzling appearance ; it seemed to him that she held her head like some angel of judgment.

The Count beckoned him forward, and he went up to her side as a man who knows he is doomed. She turned her face away as if to avoid his gaze ; but his heart was gnawed by anxiety and fear, and he had no desire to look at her. They appeared a handsome couple to the spectators. The Countess was tall and fair ; so tall, indeed, that her head came well above her companion's shoulder, though he stood six feet. Pahlen was blond, with keen, grey-blue eyes ; and his manner was usually alert and cool. Though originally of German extraction, his family had lived for some generations in Russia, where they had filled high posts in the empire. At present his assurance had left him, and he cursed himself in his heart for a coward and a fool after every

answer he gave the priest, while a sense of shame seized him each time he heard the girl's replies.

He made no attempt to salute her when the ceremony was over. They stood in absolute silence by each other's side, while the priest extinguished the candles on the altar and the Count signed to the servants to depart. Then the old man took the bride's hand and kissed her.

"Safe, imprisoned, a bride!" he said, smiling. "Rest now in your husband's love." He turned to Pahlen.

The latter's face was set and wretched, and his eyes hard and cold.

"Count, may I ask you to leave us alone?" he said a strange ring in his voice. "The Countess and I will follow you in a moment."

The girl stirred slightly, and her cousin gave Pahlen a half-apprehensive glance.

"Certainly," he answered. "The notary and I shall wait for you in my own room."

He moved off, followed by the

priest and the official. Pahlen looked rigidly in front of him till he heard the chapel door open and close again. Then he turned and fixed his eyes upon Halka who had left his side, and had paused by the altar before the brass crucifix which was half hidden by the autumn violets. She raised her veil, and a bright colour rushed to her cheeks. For a full minute neither spoke.

"In the name of God, how shall I begin!" thought Pahlen; then he rushed on his fate.

"Countess Halka," he said, and his voice was curiously even and hard, "I am about to throw myself on your mercy. I have a confession to make. You will think me both a coward and a blackguard. I——" he paused as her eyes turned upon him with a look of surprise. "I—— we have been through a ceremony which is a farce. It does not make you my wife because—" for a moment he hesitated—"because I am already married." His eyes fell at the words before hers.

One of those tense pauses followed that are a whole Day of Judgment to a man. He had looked death coolly enough in the face during the campaign in Austria the previous year; but the eyes of his own shame were harder things just then than death to meet.

It was broken by Halka turning to the altar. "Oh, this is the sign!" she exclaimed, speaking as if to a third person, her face suddenly lit up and exalted; and she knelt for a second.

Her words relaxed the tension he was suffering. He raised his head; he felt that he grasped his manhood again, and that a defence was even possible.

"It must seem to you that my honour is dead," he said in the same hard, even tone as she rose. "I had not the courage to face my ruin. I was afraid."

In an instant the enthusiastic light in her eyes died out, and a look of insulted womanhood took its place.

"And you dared to mock me, sir!"

A flush of shame and anger rushed to his face. For a moment he felt that her contempt was worse than the Tzar's wrath. He even forgot that his fate was still uncertain, and that in a few days he might be arrested.

"It would have been my ruin!" he exclaimed, almost passionately. "Before you judge me hear my story. God knows I have been forced into this position. I did not choose it."

"And I by obeying my father's wish! Oh, the dead can give hard commands!"

A deep silence followed; the thought of the oath he had sworn before the Tzar to marry the girl seemed to clutch at Pahlen's throat like a hand. In Halka's heart surprise and indignation had welled up, and a burning sense of insult seized her.

Presently he went on, keenly aware that every word he uttered must

make his position worse. His eyes never left the ground.

"It was my father's wish that I should marry you," he said, gloomily. "Life was a pleasant enough game for me. I did not care about the future. To put it frankly, if brutally, he wanted an heiress for his son. It was easy enough to swear an oath in the Tzar's presence. Then—then I met a woman who pleased my senses."

He paused, but the girl's voice rang out like a cry of pain—pain at her own humiliation.

"Go on, sir!—and this woman who pleased your senses?"

"My father was dead"—the dark red colour rushed over his face again—"I thought myself my own master. I married her privately in the country."

"That must have been the time I cried my eyes out that I had been betrothed to you! I did it every night. I—I did not want to marry you!"

"Our madness did not last long,"

said Pahlen, bitterly. "In a month we were sick of each other."

"And then you planned this insult!"

"Before God, no. I held back till there was no escape."

She gave a little moan of anger and shame, and turned her eyes on the altar.

"May I go on?" he asked in a hard, shamed tone.

She made him no answer, and he gathered himself together for the last of his confession.

"This—this woman and I knew what fools we had been. We understood it most completely—my God! yes. Then we parted. Neither of us was to betray the other. I am not doing it now; I keep her name."

She flashed round upon him. "Oh, I do not doubt your honour! Are you trying to excuse yourself to *me?*"

"No," he replied, "let me go on. I am a coward, but not the blackguard you think."

Her face had grown white and

contemptuous; she turned her head aside.

"I was ordered to Austria. The Tzar spoke to me at the Winter Palace a few hours before I left for the front. He spoke of our marriage. Then I went to Prince Volkhonsky and entreated him to help me. I did not tell him I was already married. I have no excuse to offer. I was simply afraid. He assured me that the Tzar has such a regard for personal honour that if I broke my troth and the oath I had made to my father I should be ruined. I have had to choose between *that* and the chance that you might not betray me. I had no right to expect your mercy, but I was desperate."

She made no sign of having heard him, and he went on.

"I meant to keep my oath—I never meant to break it—but the devil and a face were too strong for me," his voice broke off abruptly.

"And do you think I wanted you to keep it?" The proud note in the

girl's voice could not quite disguise the ring of wounded dignity. "No! I have a love too; but mine will last now and for ever. It is strong as eternity. It has my heart, my soul, my being!" She put her hand over her eyes for a few seconds; her bright gaze was clouded by tears.

The scene was so acutely painful that Pahlen hastened to end it. Would she spare him or not was the thought uppermost in his mind. But mingled with his own strong personal fears was a measure of sympathy for her. He had placed her in this position; the fault was his.

"I would say on my honour, only you think I have none," he said, with feeling, "that I tried to prevent this moment. I made every excuse I could—every excuse but my marriage. Condemn me! Yes. I am a coward. I like life. I do not wish to be blotted out socially, have every prospect ruined. I held back. I made a dozen plans. But I was forced on. Count Adam petitioned the Tzar. I had to come—

and—and now we stand here supposed man and wife."

But while he was speaking a change had come over Halka. A weighty thought in her little head had begun to overpower her indignation. Under its influence the insult pressed less sharply, and even began to sink out of sight. Her own words had been the spring whence this feeling had arisen.

Pahlen stood waiting for his sentence, unable—for the very unmanliness of the act—to plead for mercy. Indifferent to his suspense, she suddenly drew her wedding ring from her finger and threw it towards him. The blood rushed again to his face as the hoop spun for a moment at his feet.

"Am I pardoned?" he asked, hoarsely, as he gave her back her own.

She started and coloured, but her new mood looked from her eyes. The future seemed more actual and near to her than the present. Then it flashed across her that he was in

her power. "What a chance!" she thought. "I could frighten him and punish him for having made me a fool—only I have not time."

"Are you afraid?" she said aloud, steadily, and he winced under her tone as under a red-hot knife. "You need not be. I shall spare you because I think you are too weak and cowardly to be remembered. I shall forget you. You are not even worth hating. You, who for your own safety could hurt and shame a woman!"

He stood silent, but raised one hand and nervously twitched his moustache.

"I shall even keep your secret," she went on, with careless contempt, "because—because you might have kept it from me."

Only then he fully knew what his fear had been in the sense of relief that mingled with his shame. He had meant to kill himself if she had betrayed him.

"Thank you for that mercy," he answered, his eyes still on the ground.

"But you are not safe!" she con-

tinued, in the same cutting tone. "One woman may, but two never could keep a secret."

"The other married last month," was all Pahlen could utter.

"And yet she failed to please your mind!" The girl paused, a smile of disdain on her lips. The silence lasted a minute, and her eyes suddenly grew reflective. Her mood again changed. Pahlen, who expected another burst of scorn, heard instead a voice that had something of the hesitation and shyness of a child's.

"You have hurt me and insulted me," she said; "will you grant me a favour?"

"You have only to command me," he murmured.

"My cousin must think we are married. I must leave here with you to-night."

He looked up for the first time since his confession, and saw the colour mount her face. This was certainly the arrangement he most wished for, but that she should propose it filled him with surprise.

"It is your desire that the Count should think you are my wife?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, haughtily, her eyes falling before his. "It will suit you too, sir, I should imagine. We shall part a few leagues from here."

"I shall order my horse at once," he replied.

"You must speak to my cousin," she continued, and her tone became again hesitating and diffident. The bright colour burnt on her cheeks. "You must tell him that to be nearer the army you mean to pass your honeymoon at Veseloff. He will understand."

"And after that?"

"And after that, that you will send me into Russia. I shall send a packet of letters to your steward, and you must instruct him to forward them to my cousin at stated intervals."

"I cannot thank you enough for this favour," said Pahlen. Her eyes flashed at him for a moment. The scorn in an instant withered his re-

turning self-assurance. Then, without another word, she left the altar, bringing the scent of the violets with her, and passed him in contemptuous silence.

But he was immensely relieved. She had proposed herself what he had not dared to ask, and was willing to carry on the farce. Considerable surprise, however, mingled with his satisfaction. What was her reason? Not mercy for him, he was sure. He waited a few minutes after she had disappeared before he left the chapel, and returned to Count Adam's room. The latter was bending over the register with the priest and notary. He looked up and asked for Halka.

"She has gone to change her dress," replied Pahlen, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword and glancing at the floor. "I shall ask you to order the carriage at once, Count Adam."

"The carriage!" was the surprised answer. "Surely you have leave and can stay here to-night?"

"It is impossible," said Pahlen,

briefly; then he added listlessly, as if repeating a lesson, "We intend to spend our honeymoon at Veseloff, as it is nearer the cantonments. After that my wife goes into Russia."

The Count looked keenly at him. He had taken care of his cousin's child for years while that cousin followed his own risky career at the Russian Court. Now he was dead, and Count Adam secretly believed in hell, where perhaps he was better able to communicate with the earth than if he had been in heaven. It was very necessary, therefore, that all his wishes about his daughter should be carried out. Count Adam being old and nervous and in dread of devils, had trembled for Halka, having special reasons for doing so.

As he walked up and down the room stroking his beard, tapping the floor with his stick, and muttering to himself, Pahlen thought him half mad, and his impatience to end the scene increased. The guardsman felt so poor a hero, that he could in his anger and shame have leapt on his

horse there and then and galloped away from the house.

After some minutes had passed, a servant flung the door open, and Halka entered in a travelling dress. Pahlen gave her one brief glance as she came across the threshold. Her eyes looked bright and starry, and her face even radiant. Her gaze, however, which seemed to take in everything else in the room, avoided him ; he felt himself entirely ignored. Count Adam's voice fell on his ear bidding him sign, and he instantly obeyed. This was the completion of his crime ; he had now put himself in the power of the law.

Halka took the pen with a sudden access of colour. Pahlen turned his head aside : when he glanced at the book again her signature lay under his.

A glass of fiery *wodhi* was handed to him, and he drank it as he would have taken brimstone at the moment, though he hated the spirit. Then the old Count took Halka's hand and looked at her with tenderness.

"You little soul," he said, with a quaver, remembering his duty and the devils, "may God keep you."

She kissed him and laughed. Pahlen noted that there was genuine gaiety in her manner.

"Yes, God shall keep me," she replied, with sudden gravity.

"And you spend the night at Veseloff."

She stroked his hand, turning slightly aside.

"Yes," said Pahlen, and the coolness of his own voice rather surprised him.

"Basil Vassiliévitch," remarked Count Adam, "do not stay long at Veseloff. It is too near the Vistula."

"We intend to remain—" began the young man, to whom this time of waiting was like eternity.

"Only a few days," put in Halka, swiftly, her face still averted.

"Yes, only a few days," he repeated.

Just then the carriage was announced, and he offered her his hand. The old Count would have

led them to supper, but neither was in a mood to eat. They went into the hall, where the servants had gathered to see the bride and bridegroom depart. Halka's maid stood cloaked and hooded in the portico. All present knew that the fears of the old Count, together with the war, had caused this hurried private wedding.

Pahlen led Halka to the carriage and stood hesitating by the door. Her voice distinct and icy fell on his ear.

"Ride, Basil Vassiliévitch! This carriage is not large enough for you and me," she said in French.

The huge old coach could have held a family, but he was extremely relieved, and turned to his horse. The Count beckoned to him as he was about to mount.

"Beware of the French!" the old man whispered, pulling Pahlen's sleeve.

The latter stared at him; the Count drew him nearer and embraced him. A moment later he

left the old man still muttering his enigmatical warning, and sprang across his horse.

Then the strange bridal procession started, the Count watching them from the portico, a black, bent figure against the flood of light.

Pahlen rode on, his fancy turning the old-fashioned lumbering coach into a tumbril, only he was the victim, not Halka. The chaff and kindly wishes of his comrades rushed across his mind, and he cursed himself and the accident of the night. Yet his worst fears were removed. Halka knew all, and was still kind enough to let the world think that she was his wife.

The stars were out and a bright hunter's moon. They and the lamps showed the dangers of the road, which were so numerous that it was well on in the night before the party drew near the end of their journey.

After rolling through a wood where the branches hung over the track, blue-black as the lamps fell on them, the carriage drew up before a large

wooden house, from the lower windows of which lights were shining. Someone touched Pahlen's knee as he sat still in his saddle and scanned the building. He looked down and saw Halka's maid.

"You must come in, excellency," she said, and moved away.

He wondered why; then concluded that appearance had still to be kept up before the servants, and alighted. As his feet touched the ground a man came up and took his horse.

He saw Halka leave the carriage, and, followed by her maid, enter the house. A broad flood of light lay across the leaf-strewn grass. He walked along it, feeling himself suddenly illuminated, and went into the hall. Here he caught the last glimpse of the girl's skirt as she disappeared through a distant door. The place was empty; he sat down and stroked his moustache, waiting for further orders from his supposed bride.

In the silence he heard the car-

riage drive away. This surprised him a little. Why should the horses be sent back at so late an hour, and when the roads were so bad? At last, as no one appeared, he rose and was about to retire when a door opened and the maid came towards him.

"You can go now, highness," she said, with gravity.

"What house is this?" asked Pahlen.

"An ancient mansion of the Mnizeks," replied the woman. "The Countess bids me tell you," she added, "that she is going into Galicia."

Pahlen turned on his heel much pleased at this news. Count Adam would certainly think he had sent the girl to Russia, if she went to the estate her father had left her in Austrian Poland. As he left the house a faint peal of laughter followed him; the hall door was slammed to noisily, and the stream of light suddenly blotted out. He might have fallen into a pool of ink,

the darkness was so deep. Then his pupils widened, and he caught a gleam of moonshine on a branch. The rattle of steel and an impatient hoof told him where his horse stood, the man had gone, and the bridle was hitched to a tree.

Springing into the saddle he rode off with lightened spirits, but he had not ridden far when it spun round and he was thrown to the ground. The girth had given way, and he found it had been cut through on one side to within an inch of the opposite edge. At that moment the face of the man who had taken the horse flashed into his mind, and he knew that he had seen it before. Why had he not recognised it at the right moment! Why had he been such a fool!

"It is that infernal emissary," he said to himself aloud. "But what is he doing in that house?"

II.

SO many of these emissaries were going through Russian Poland that Pahlen knew it was his duty to report the matter to the Starosta of the district and to General Benningsen. But private reasons led him to evade both duties. The peasants would not stir unless one of their hereditary lords led them. Count Adam was not likely to do so, and he was the only male representative of the Mnizeks now alive.

Four days after the incident he chanced to be out with a reconnoitering party, and rode into the wood where he had parted from Halka. The grass in front of the house bore the marks of many feet. No one answered to the soldier's summons, and the house was found to be deserted. Pahlen's sense of relief increased as he realised that the girl

had really gone. For a time she had passed out of his life. There was an hour coming he was aware when the Tzar and Count Adam and his friends would ask where was his wife ; but between that hour and the present lay the whole campaign. His spirits became once more gay ; shame and fear left him ; he felt life had still its splendid possibilities.

The rapid advance of the French now set the Russian army in motion. The beginning of winter was spent in a series of actions which drove Benningsen from his position on the Narew and brought the enemy as far as Pultush. The country over which the forces were passing was the very worst for the transport of troops. Great plains turned into mud by the frequent rains, or huge forests spread on all sides. The lakes and rivers were swollen and rapid, supplies were bad, and the weather infamous.

While the two armies were thus moving, the one pursuing, the other retreating, Pahlen, now on Benningsen's staff, was ordered to carry a

despatch to General Buxhæwden, who was unable to unite his division with the main body of the Russians. The Generals were not on friendly terms, and the duty was rather a delicate one ; added to which the armies were not only divided by lakes and forests, but the enemy's scouts covered the country.

A wind keen as a knife drove the sleet in his face as he set off on his ride. He had put the despatch under the breast of his tunic, and he wore a thick *vourka*, or hooded cloak, over his uniform. There was no road to follow. Men and horses and guns had been bogged in the plains ; and the mud rose to his charger's fetlock as he galloped along. The short winter day of Northern Poland was closing in ; the sun set by two in the afternoon. A great lake spread to the horizon on one side, and beyond this was a forest through which he had to pass. Overhead a grey sky foretold that the sleet was about to change to snow.

He was well-armed, keen-eyed, and

alert ; and as he galloped along by the bank of the lake he felt he was racing the light. If the darkness overtook him it would be impossible to find a path through the forest, and to keep on the outskirts of the trees would lengthen his journey.

The sun was hidden, but he could tell where it drew to the horizon by a few white rays that pierced the slate-coloured clouds. The lake had risen into waves, and the wind swept through the sedges and withered reeds. The mud was beginning to harden under its bitter breath, and the ground grew easier to traverse. He had just thrown a glance over his shoulder to see how near the shafts of light had sunk to the rim of the lake, when his horse suddenly stumbled and fell forward.

Pahlen was hurled on the bank, but sprang up the next second unhurt. By means of voice and reins he got the animal on his feet. A brief examination showed that it had trodden on the broken point of a lance and was lamed for life.

The sun had won the race, and Pahlen looked towards the forest. He was some versts from the nearest town, and he doubted whether a horse could be found there, as the inhabitants had fled before the approach of the armies.

A large farmhouse stood at some distance from the lake. Taking his pistols from the holsters, he walked towards it. From its size and numerous outbuildings it had evidently been the home of some well-to-do small landowner; but the glimpse he caught of the empty haggart told him that Tolstoy's Cossacks had been there.

The door was secured, and the place looked deserted. But he knocked till a shrill, timorous voice called from within to know who demanded admittance.

"In the name of the Tzar!" said Pahlen; and, after a brief pause, the bolts shot back. A lean-faced man, in a dark caftan and with a fur cape over his shoulder, looked out.

"What is it, your nobility?" he asked, abjectly.

"I wish for a horse."

"A horse, excellency! Before God, Tolstoy ate them all up."

Pahlen pushed past the man, and entered the kitchen. The peasant stared blankly at him.

"Find me one at once," he said, authoritatively. "Where is the nearest village?"

The imperious tone refreshed the peasant's memory.

"A farmer living some versts to the south owned several horses," he said; "would his excellency go thither?"

As this was a direction which would lead him out of his way, Pahlen ordered the man to proceed to the farm at once and return with a horse, promising him gold if he came back quickly.

The kitchen stove was half broken, and Pahlen followed the man up a narrow stair to a room which contained some half-smashed furniture. A fire blazed in the stove, casting a glow on a door at the other end of the apartment. The peasant ex-

plained that he used this room as it faced the lake, and the robbers in the forest to the rear could not see the light or notice the smoke. These robbers, he added, were deserters from the Grand Army, who robbed and murdered the peasants and any straggler from either force that fell into their hands with a cool indifference to their nationality.

Pahlen went to the window, a narrow opening in the timber walls, as soon as the man left the room. The sleet had changed to snow, coming down in fine, powdery flakes. The form of his horse loomed vaguely through the mingled whiteness and gloom as it stood by the slate-grey lake, turning its head now and then and whinnying with fear. The sight made him swing round, and hastening down the stair, he left the house.

The horse neighed gladly as it saw him, and limped forward. He removed the saddle and bridle, and, with a sharp pain of regret and pity, fired a charge through its head.

Then he took up the saddlery and went back to the farm.

During this incident the peasant had lingered in a dark corner of the kitchen. He now stole to the door and shivered as he looked at the uninviting scene. The village was four versts away, and night had all but fallen. But the inborn abject fear of the serf for those in power made him afraid to disobey Pahlen, though weeks of solitude and terror since Tolstoy had hung his master on suspicion of being a spy, had roused a ferocity in his nature, and he would gladly have cut the Russian's throat if he had dared.

Cursing him under his breath, he went out, and had only gone a few yards when he drew up suddenly, and his eyes raked the gloom. By the rattle of steel and the tramp of hoofs he knew a small body of cavalry was approaching, and was seized with fear lest the men were Cossacks.

In a few minutes he was able to make out the horsemen, and as he

recognised the uniform he said to himself that *Cherni Bog*, the black god, had delivered the Russian into the hands of his foes. He sprang forward, and held up his hand.

The jingle and clank almost instantly ceased, and the officer in command ordered him to approach. The men sat still and silent on their horses, the impatient champing of a bit alone breaking the silence as the Pole stole up.

"Highness," he said, clutching in his excitement at the officer's bridle-reins, "there is a Russian officer with despatches waiting for a horse in my house."

The lieutenant's face lit up. "Here is something better than supplies," he remarked to his sergeant. "Look here, my lads, we 'll take this Russian."

"As your highness wishes," answered the sergeant ; and the whole party wheeled and rode towards the house.

"Where is he?" inquired the officer, as he dismounted.

"In the room over the kitchen. He is armed, excellency."

The lieutenant smiled. He placed three of his men in the kitchen, and, ordering a fourth man to accompany him, went up the stair. He and his five troopers wore the uniform of a Polish lancer regiment lately raised and now attached to Davout's corps.

"This is splendid!" he thought as he stole up, his naked sword in his hand. "As interesting as a game, and yet real war."

"Wait here," he said aloud to his companion when they got on the landing; and, opening the door boldly, walked into the room.

It was empty, but Pahlen's pistols lay on the table. In a second they were in the boy's hands. The door at the other end of the room was open, and he heard spurred feet crossing the floor. A thrill of nervous excitement ran through his body, and his hand tightened on his weapons.

Almost immediately afterwards Pahlen appeared in the doorway.

The lieutenant was standing in the glow of the firelight just as it danced across the boards. As the guardsman recognised his cap and jacket his sword rang out.

"Yield, sir!" cried the boy, a thrill of excitement again seizing him. "Yield! my men are in the house."

For reply Pahlen rushed upon him. The steel flashed like a line of fire as it caught the glow and swung above the lancer's head. The boy sprang deftly aside, and the sword cut the air. Drawing up at the other side of the table, he looked with a smile at Pahlen. The pistols were still in his hands, but he did not fire.

In the brief tense pause that followed the soldier without ran into the room. Pahlen turned upon him as the bigger and stronger man. He carried his lance, and prodded with it till Pahlen closed upon him. At such near quarters the lance was useless, and a sword-thrust in his side sent him reeling to the floor.

The other lancers had clattered up the stair, and, bursting into the room,

hurled themselves upon Pahlen. Their officer, who had watched the fight without moving, ordered them to lower their weapons. He had to shout his order twice before they obeyed. Then they fell back sullenly.

"Take away his sword!" he cried out; "take it away! Do you yield, sir?"

Count Basil bowed.

"Then give me your despatch!" cried the boy in a clear, treble voice.

Pahlen glanced at his captor, but the uncertain light prevented him from distinctly seeing his face. The quick breathing of the lancers sounded loud in the pause as they stood grouped together touched here and there by a line of firelight. The wounded man lay farther back among the shadows; his lips moaned.

"Oh, look to Tzinski!" suddenly exclaimed the officer, as Pahlen began to unfasten his cloak.

One of the men bent over the soldier.

"Is he dead?" demanded the

lieutenant, in a sharp tone of pity and fear.

"He lives yet, excellency, but is bleeding fast."

The boy tore off his sash and flung it to the man. Then he turned impatiently to Pahlen.

"Quick, sir! The despatch!"

Pahlen drew the paper slowly and as if reluctantly from his breast. He made a step forward as if to give it to the boy, but suddenly, with fine audacity, flung it on the burning wood, stamping into the flame with his foot.

It was the work of a second, and the next instant a lance pierced his shoulder. The boy ran out of the gloom up to the fire, and tried to snatch the despatch from the flames. But Pahlen had done his work well, and a yellow tongue leaped up the stove.

"Oh, wretch!" he cried. "Now we shall not know your plan!"

"Shall I kill him, highness?" asked the sergeant, fiercely.

The officer sprang round.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Don't dare touch him!"

But Pahlen expected his end. The Polish lancers were raw and undisciplined levies; and he had seen that these men yielded reluctant obedience. In the pause a sharp pulse of pain shot through his shoulder; the blood was running fast down his cloak.

"You dared to play this trick!" cried the lieutenant; "You deserve to lose your life! Davout would have shot you for this!"

His tone of defiance struck Pahlen with a sense of familiarity. He had heard that ring of scorn somewhere before. The lad's face looked as Diana's might have done when she set her hounds on Actæon. His eyes were as blue, and at the moment as pitiless, as those of the insulted goddess herself.

But his slight interest passed as the pain stabbed him again. Pressing a silk handkerchief to the wound, he stood silent while the boy went on.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

The next instant the lieutenant stepped back out of the light, and his eyes shot towards the door. His sergeant glanced at him in surprised delight, for it was a fine thing for Poniatowski's Lancers to have captured one of the Tzar's horse guardsmen. Before any one, however, spoke, the peasant came into the room with a rope in his hand. His lips had widened into a grin.

"There is a strong beam in the kitchen, highness," he said, eagerly, "and this hemp has been round a man's throat. Oh, your highness may believe me! Tolstoy hung my master on it."

The boy waved him back. "The officer has yielded, and I spare his life," he said, quickly, the imperious note gone from his tone. "Attend to the wounded lancer," he added, and turned towards the door, keeping his face averted from Phalen.

"What about the prisoner, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"Oh, he!" replied the lieutenant, as if he had forgotten Phalen. "Yes, keep him here to-night. Wellenski and Borisoff, remain as guard, and take him to the nearest outpost to-morrow. Sergeant, you and Lobenki follow me."

"To ride back to-night, excellency?"

"Yes. Get the horses."

"Our comrades won't welcome us, excellency, if we come back empty-handed. Their stomachs are long and empty."

"And also, your nobility," put in the peasant, drawing part of the rope backward and forward in his hand, "the snow is falling so heavily that you will ride into the lake or lose yourselves in the forests, where you will find plenty of wolves and deserters."

The boy made no reply, and signing to the sergeant, left the room. An icy wind beat the snowflakes in his face as he opened the kitchen door and went out into the night. The sergeant came behind him, and

bending their heads before the blast, they tried to make their way to the stables.

Touching walls and stumbling over logs of wood, they groped their way along, the snow whipping their faces, their eyes blinded and half shut. The lieutenant paused when they had gone a few yards. All before him was a darkness in which not even the vaguest outline of the lake or forest could be seen, and around him a silence broken by the piping of the wind and the snarls of the wolves as they fought over the body of the horse. Their cries sounded as if devils were saying grace for the food lying on a dozen battlefields.

"It 's no use, excellency," said the sergeant. "The armies themselves halt to-night."

"Then I must have another room," returned the boy, which seemed an irrelevant answer.

Guided by the light from the open door, they made their way back to the kitchen. The snowflakes danced and fell like tiny spirits of the storm

in the yellow ray that pierced the night for a few yards. The sergeant shut the door noisily to as they got into shelter, and shook the snow from his shoulders. Then he seized a bundle of wood, and went to help the peasant light the fire in the stove.

The boy watched them for a few minutes, his face red with cold.

"Here, you fellow!" he called out suddenly. "Light a fire in some other room for me."

"Your excellency shall be obeyed," answered the peasant, rising from his knees and taking up the rope.

He led the way up the stair, but as he laid his hand on the door opening into the room in which Phalen had been captured, the lieutenant drew back with a gesture like alarm.

"Not there!" he said, imperiously.

"We shall only pass through, highness. The room lies behind it."

"Is there a light within?"

"The firelight alone," answered the man.

The boy put his cloak up to his

face and the guide opened the door. Pahlen had sunk upon a chair, and did not look up. As the lieutenant's eyes fell on his own wounded trooper, he swerved round and went towards him. Bending over the man, he spoke a few words and examined his wound. Then, with the help of a lancer, he bound it up with some of the linen the peasant had brought. As soon as this was done, the men carried their comrade down stairs.

"This way, your nobility," said the peasant, as they moved off. And he trod like a cat across the floor, dragging the rope behind him. Pahlen did not raise his head, and the boy hurried by so fast that his feet caught at the door in the long, grey thing that trailed like a snake on the boards.

"Oh, highness, that is the hanged man clutching at your feet," observed the peasant, complacently. "They say the dead like revenge as well as the living, and he wants you to hang this gentleman."

"Silence!" replied the lieutenant,

angrily, and shook his feet free with a look of disgust.

The second room was in complete darkness, and the soft swish of the snow could be heard against a small window high up in the wall. The Pole, suddenly remembering that he had not brought a light, returned to the outer room, leaving the door open. The lad could see the fire-light shining on the scarlet stains on the floor and flickering on Pahlen's figure. He shuddered and turned his back on the sight, and, going further into the room, groped his way along by the wall.

The footsteps of the Pole rang out on each step as he went down stairs, as if he were marking time. The boy listened and counted till the man reached the bottom. Then he thought he heard the drip from Pahlen's wound, till the fancy became unendurable. He strained his ears, and dared not look round. Then the wish to see if he were really bleeding to death became stronger than he could control. He turned with

both hands stretched out as if to shut the door, but some other power sent him across the threshold and into the room.

Pahlen looked up, and the boy seized what was left of the linen.

"If you will sit with your back to the light," he said, almost defiantly, "I will attend to your wound."

His tone struck Pahlen as truculent, but as he had lost a great deal of blood, he was not in a mood to quarrel with the boy. He obeyed, and the lieutenant drew near, and scarcely seemed to breathe as he touched him lightly with his hands. When he had bound up the wound he drew back, shaking his fingers free from the blood with almost an air of disdain.

"It is an enemy's blood, I know," said Pahlen.

"Yes, that is true," replied the boy, with some vehemence.

"Still, you have saved my life," continued Pahlen. "Thank you. You have hands like a girl."

"They are strong enough to use a

sword," was the defiant answer ; but the boy had blushed, and he turned rapidly away.

Five minutes later the peasant entered the inner room, bringing a light and firewood, and saw the boy standing under the little window with his drawn sword held crosswise in his hands, and looking as if he defied the whole world to doubt his manhood.

" There 's warmth and light, highness," remarked the man, " and I will get you food. Must I feed the prisoner ? My master's ghost drags on the rope. Well, God is great. May a battle-field and a wolf's caress be his end."

III.

TOWARDS midnight Pahlen lay down on the boards. Though no guard was set to watch him, escape was practically impossible. The lancers occupied the kitchen, and their officer was stationed in the inner room. The window was small and secured. Even if he could get out of the house his chance of reaching either camp of the Russians alive was slight without horse or arms.

The pain of his wound kept him long awake. The voices and songs of the lancers came for some time through the rafters to his ears. He hoped the *wodhi* was going round, and that the men would still be drunk in the morning. After a while the noise died away, and silence finally fell on the house. Then to the music of the wolves he sank into oblivion too.

Daylight was creeping into the room when he awoke. He had had a singularly vivid dream; Halka and he had met on a battle-field. He had no wish to remember her even in his sleep, and he awoke with an unpleasant impression.

His wound had stiffened, and he could only use his right arm with difficulty. The sound of loud voices had struck on his ears the moment of waking, and for a minute he believed his hope was confirmed, and that the men were drunk. A look of resolution sprang into his eyes at the thought. As he listened, however, he was struck by a peculiarity in the tones that he had not noted the night before. The men's articulation was sharp and rapid, and unlike the soft sounds of the Slavonic tongue.

Getting up cautiously he went to the window, and rubbed the hoar frost from the glass. A white world met his gaze, and the scarlet disk of the rising sun was cut across by a gleaming blue-white line. A star still trembled high in the sky; beneath it,

as it were, was a sight that instantly arrested his attention.

Tracks of numerous footprints led from the forest in the rear straight up to the house. By their depth in the snow they had been recently made. No horses had accompanied the party, and as the angry voices rose again from the kitchen, a suspicion of what had happened flashed across him.

He turned, and leaving the room paused on the landing. The voices were now distinct, and the men were talking in French. The uproar was so great that he ventured half way down the stairs, and peeped through a chink in the wooden wall.

A dozen men in tattered uniforms of various French regiments were standing up in the centre of the kitchen shouting and cursing as one of their number counted the gold in the sergeant's purse. All provisions were paid for at this time by Napoleon's order, and the sergeant's pocket had been well supplied. The man himself lay as if asleep on the floor.

Three of his comrades were stretched beside him, but the wounded lancer had made an effort to rise, and his glazed eyes were still stamped with the terror with which he had met death. Red pools had gathered on the floor, and the blood had frozen before it had reached the snow by the open door. The peasant had escaped. In all probability he had gone out leaving the door ajar, and the deserters had only to step across the threshold to cut the throats of the sleeping men.

As he took in the scene with one swift glance, Pahlen knew that he and the Polish officer would suffer a similar fate before an hour had passed unless they escaped at once.

To wake the boy was his first duty. He hastened back and passed into the inner room. The lieutenant had not undressed, and lay asleep on the bed. Pahlen's sword and pistol were at his head, and even in that moment of anxiety it struck the former that lethal weapons looked strange by the boy's fair face.

He raised his sword and laid his hand upon his shoulder. The lad started and sat up, his clear bright expression changing in a moment to one that made Pahlen step back a pace.

Without a word he sprang to his feet, the blood rushing to his face, while convulsively he clutched the hilt of his sword. Pahlen wheeled round and stood with his back to him, struck dumb by amazement.

Was he mad, or drunk, or dreaming? he thought. Was the boy before him not a boy, but a woman, the girl whose face he had seen in that nightmare of a dream? For a minute his astonishment, flooding his mind, seemed to drown his senses. He could only stare vacantly at the little window beautified by the miniature foliage which the frost crystals had built upon it. A woman dressed as a man—dressed as a soldier, in command of men, acting the part of an officer! That, too, in the midst of war, when Death played his rough game with human lives on bloody battle-fields.

Suddenly all the incidents that led up to this moment grouped themselves in his mind. The old Count's enigmatical warnings, the girl's request, the presence of Poniatowski's agent in the wood. A feeling of disgust instantly rose and mingled with his amazement as he grasped fully the certainty of her act.

Their danger had now increased tenfold. Her irresolution, her hesitation to use his pistols, were explained. She was as absolutely helpless as if she were not armed. Their instant escape, the defence of their lives depended upon his nerve and promptness, he believed.

For both their sakes he swiftly decided not to let her know that he had recognised her.

The front of the house was barred to their escape, but he had discovered a stair the previous evening which he believed would lead to an outlet. He was about to speak, but her voice stopped him. The colour was burning in her cheeks, and her heart beat fast.

"If you are trying to escape," she said, "I shall fire."

He faced her, and his tone and manner became resolute in an instant.

"We must both escape, and at once," he said, lowering his voice.

As he spoke her confidence crept back. During the pause when he had turned from her she had been swept by fear lest he had recognised her, and she had controlled an impulse with difficulty to run out of the room and down to her lancers, who believed her to be a boy.

"Your men are killed," he continued rapidly—"killed by robbers, who are now in the house. Take that pistol and follow me. Be certain to use it if we are discovered."

He motioned her towards the second door of the room, but she did not stir.

"My men killed! It must be a lie!" she gasped.

"As you value your life come with me," answered Pahlen. "It is a most certain truth."

For reply she ran to the door lead-

ing to the outer room. With two strides he crossed the floor, and placed himself on the threshold.

"Let me pass, sir!" she exclaimed, anger and dismay in her eyes.

"I cannot," he said, in a low, concentrated tone. "A dozen Frenchmen are in the house."

"Frenchmen! Oh, I see what you would do! You would make me a prisoner! They are my friends."

"As devils would be! We have not an instant to lose."

"They will respect my uniform. Stand aside, sir! I am going to speak to them."

"Good God, no!" He stretched his arm across the doorway. The idea of seizing her forcibly and carrying her away darted through his brain. Every moment was vital. Her perversity was lessening their chance of escape.

"Lieutenant, I tell you these men are merciless," he said, swiftly, "I am not deceiving you. They will cut your throat as they have cut your men's."

Even in that moment of acute excitement he noticed the look of relief that sprang into her eyes. She was satisfied now that he thought her a boy. His words, too, gradually convinced her of her danger, and she drew back. Pahlen thrust a pistol in her hand. The deserters had become silent, and the fact alarmed him. He caught her arm, but she dragged it from him, and ran herself to the second door, which opened into a long winding passage. They hastened round corners, down two or three steps to another corridor, where they came to a ladder-like stair. Here she suddenly drew up.

"Why run away?" she said, fearlessly. "We are two, we are men, we are armed. These men are traitors to the Emperor. Let us fight them!"

"Impossible!" It flashed across him that her words were meant to deceive him. The attitude of her mind which enabled her to act impressed him at the same moment.

She still hesitated; he pointed urgently to the stair. "Go down, I

entreat you!" he said, almost imperiously.

"Ah, I know you to be a coward!" she exclaimed, and drew back.

Pahlen took a step forward, raised her in his arms, giving himself exquisite pain as he did so, and carried her down. She was no light weight, but she was for a minute too amazed to struggle.

The room beneath was low and dark, but a tiny window enabled him to see her face as he put her down. Her cheeks were scarlet, her blue eyes blazing.

"You insolent Russian!" she cried. "You insolent Russian! How dare you! I am an officer, not a child!"

"There was no time to lose," he answered swiftly, but apologetically. "Our throats are at stake. We cannot fight twelve devils. We must fly."

A shout reached their ears as he spoke. She caught the keen, alert look in his eyes, and the danger that threatened her life lessened her sense

of lost dignity. A door stood ajar at the farthest end of the room ; they went through it. Three steps led down into a cellar filled with empty barrels, and, making their way amongst them, they reached a ladder raised against a door that stood high in the wall.

Pahlen went first ; she came behind him, their scabbards clanking against each rung ; her face, suddenly pale from excitement, was close to his feet. He turned his head at the top, and looking down met her eyes. The thought flashed across him that her lancer cap became her. Then the danger and absurdity of her position instantly recurred to his mind, and he laid his hand on the bolt of the door. As he drew it back he heard the sound of hoofs within.

They had got into the stable, and the luck of this accident made both their eyes light up. The girl darted by him, and ran towards her horse.

"*Douchinka !* We are alone ! Our brave men are killed !" she cried

pathetically, caressing the animal. "You must carry me far to-day."

The saddles and bridles had been slung across an empty rack, and Pahlen hastened to seize two of each. He had scarcely laid a hand upon the leather when a sound outside made him pause. Then he caught Halka's hand, whispered what he had heard in her ear, and drew her to a corner of the stable where a quantity of bent-grass and dead leaves had been piled. They had scarcely hidden themselves behind the heap when the stable door was flung open, and nine or ten men entered. Halka's breath broke from her in short, quick gasps, and Pahlen's eyes took on a curious light.

A big hound-faced man walked up to the nearest horse and examined it, then he glanced at the saddlery and accoutrements. He wore one of the white coats that had been supplied to the French army, but which after Eylau were discarded. Something in the saddlery attracted his attention. Pahlen's grasp on his pistol tightened as he saw him suddenly look towards

the grass. Every nerve was instantly stretched, every muscle ready for a spring as he watched the movements of the man.

But the robber had not seen them. He swung round, turning his back on the corner, and roared at his gang.

"Now, you blind sons of dogs!" he cried. "A man has escaped. One of these horses was an officer's charger. Only a sergeant and four privates lie inside. What in hell did you let him go for?"

The deserters stood up and swore, but the man silenced them by a ferocious look and oath.

"Here! you Jacque and Antoine," he roared, pointing a pistol at the group of men. "Take these horses to our quarters. Every other man follow me into the house."

He drove the deserters through the doorway leading into the cellar. They stumbled and clattered down the ladder with oaths and shouts. Then he followed, leaving the two men he had named behind in the stable.

They glanced furtively at each other as they saddled the horses. When they had done, they divided the animals into two groups of threes, the man named Jacque told his companion to go out with his lot first.

"Let them go out by themselves," answered the man sullenly. "We can mount outside."

"All right," said the other deserter, with apparent indifference. "But remember, my merry son of a cock, Stockpot gave you a gold piece more than your right."

"You lie!" burst out his comrade. "And here! We 'll walk together from the stable."

They went out driving the horses before them, and Pahlen heard them still disputing as they mounted in the yard. If he had been alone he would have sprung out and tried to overpower them. Hampered with the girl he did not dare make the attempt. The possession of at least one of the horses was a positive necessity. He knew that he must now follow the

two men to the forest and force them to give up the animals.

He waited a few minutes in keen impatience to give them time to get in among the trees, the voices of the other deserters breaking every now and then on his ears. In the crisis he heard Halka stir. He turned his face towards her, but only saw her close cut hair and the back of her cap.

He was sure he heard her sob, and knew that at last she realised how close she was to death. His own face grew hard and anxious.

"Do not be afraid," he whispered. "We shall get the horses yet."

He had bent nearer to her as he spoke ; she drew swiftly back amongst the reeds.

"Afraid!" and he heard her choke down her sobs, and saw her draw her hand quickly across her eyes. "Afraid! That is not likely, sir! Poniatowski's Lancers know how to die."

"I know your courage," he answered. "We will follow those two men and overpower them."

He rose, held out, and then drew back his hand. She stood upright, her face pale but composed, though some tears hung among her lashes.

"Run in the track of the horses," he said, as they reached the door. "You can defend your life?"

She gave him one swift, indignant glance. "You forget, sir, I am an officer!" she exclaimed; and, drawing her sword, ran on.

"I shall have to kill her yet if they overpower us," he thought, as he followed her; and kept close in her wake to cover her in case they should be seen from a window.

But no ball whistled after them, and before long they reached the outskirts of the forest. The track divided here; each deserter had led his string of horses in a separate path through the trees. Halka paused, uncertain which track to follow, and Pahlen took the lead.

He looked back and saw her standing panting, with her hand pressed to her side. Though his thoughts were chiefly concentrated upon get-

ting the horses, the astonishment he had felt when he aroused her still possessed his mind. Under his anxiety he was conscious that something extraordinary had happened, and that when he had killed the men and obtained the horses and had time to think of it that this amazement would increase.

The undergrowth thickened as they went on. The tracks wound more and more as the men had ridden into the clearer spaces. The tangled branches of the birch and young beech scattered sprays of crystals over both pursuers. Now and again Pahlen looked back to be sure that Halka was behind him. Sometimes he saw her upraised arm as she held up a branch; sometimes her face, pink with exercise, flashed out from the network of the slender silver birches.

Suddenly they heard voices in front of them. He raised a warning hand, and crept round the trees till he was within a few paces of the men. They had drawn up in a clear-

ing, and each man kept his group of three horses some yards apart from the other. The deserter Antoine was speaking, and at every word he uttered his eyes rolled round the opening.

"I've had enough of Captain Stockpot and this cursed life," he said, defiantly. "A wise woman in Warsaw told me a thing. Yes, wring her neck! she did. She peered at me with her hell-cat eyes. I hear her screech now. A comrade was to kill me, she said. But she lied—lied damnably. Last night I felt the rope round my throat. I won't feel that twice. Hey! will you come to Mural?"

"Go to the devil!" cried the other man. "What do you want to be shot by the Russians and eaten by wolves for? Let them hang me when they get me! Stockpot is good enough for me."

"You 'll squeal another mass when the cord 's tightening round your neck," answered his comrade. "I shall go. I am no traitor. I 'll keep

my oath to Stockpot. I 'll remember the feasting and the deviltry we have had. I won't tell what I know about you and him and the gang. If I am asked for evidence I 'll remember my oath. Oh, yes ! "

He turned his horses away, throwing a dark, suspicious glance upon his companion, who sat still in his saddle with a tightened rein and his eyes cast down. Once and again he looked back, but on reaching the trees he burst into a coarse song as if his fear had vanished. At that moment the other man raised his gun and fired ; the song turned into a hoarse cry, and lurching to one side, the deserter fell to the ground, his foot dragging in the stirrup for a yard as the horses galloped off. The other robber sprang from his saddle, and flinging his rein across a bough, bent over the body. At the same instant Pahlen ran out and fired with something of the excitement and interest he would have felt if it had been a wolf he had been killing. The man leapt up, the gold he had

taken from his comrade's pocket falling in a shower on the snow ; then with a groan he dropped forward on his face.

Pahlen seized the horses. When he turned he saw Halka standing a few yards off with horror in her eyes. The other horses had broken themselves free, and were running through the wood in the direction of the farm.

He untied one of the animals and led it towards her. She drew back, throwing him one eloquent glance of mingled reproach and terror. Pahlen began to adjust the stirrups to give her time to recover herself. When he looked again she had drawn her sleeve across her eyes.

"The horses have headed for the farm," he said hurriedly.

She looked up with some agitation, but tried to recover herself. He placed the reins in her hand, and swung himself across the back of his own horse. A glance thrown askance showed him that the next second she had mounted with the ease of a boy.

He rode off under the impression that she was following him. On looking back, however, he found this was a mistake. The girl was riding across the clearing in the opposite direction. He turned and galloped up to her side.

"You must come with me," he said, authoritatively. "That way takes you deeper into the forest."

"I wish to leave you!" she replied, passionately, her eyes averted from his.

"That devil in the white coat will be on our track in a minute," he answered, controlling his impatience. "His mercy will be short. You are riding into his den. You saw that murder. That and worse will be our fate."

"I will not ride with you!" Her voice still trembled with passion.

"Till beyond pursuit, you must," —his tone was polite but decided— "unless you wish for death, and it would not be a swift one," he added.

Her anger suddenly died away at his words. Without answering him

she turned her horse, and they rode back in silence across the clearing.

Keeping within the trees, they went on till they had left the farmhouse some distance in the rear, then they ventured into the open plain. But shouts instantly followed them, and the deserters, mounting the captured horses, galloped in pursuit.

Pahlen leant forward, struck Halka's horse on the flank with the flat of his sword, drove his spurs home, and tore on. But he knew the robbers dare not ride far from the forest, and he had no real fear of their coming within pistol shot of him.

A blue fog gathered over the plain as they raced along. Their horses' breaths came in white gushes, and the smoke rose from their quarters as they sank hoof deep in the snow at every stride. The whitened forest rose on the right, the frozen lake with its frosted reaches lay on the left. The scarlet sun had disappeared, and the fog hung in folds over the glassy surface. A flock of wild swans flew circling in dark lines

over their heads, their shrill cries piercing the mist. Right before them a grey form stood in the snow. For a moment its red eyes faced the riders, then with a snarl it sprang aside and ran back to the forest. Halka's horse swerved in fright, and stopped short.

Pahlen looked back. The fog had thickened towards the forest, and the pursuers were blotted out. Not a sound but the piercing note of the swans broke the silence. They had got beyond the reach of the deserters, and he could give attention to the thoughts that were clamouring to be heard.

IV.

HER eyes met his, and he saw her expression had altered. Though their gaze separated at once, he knew that her fear of the robbers had merged into fear of his recognition.

Her disguise was so good that if he had never met her before he would have taken her for a boy. He noticed, too, that she rode well, and had been through the riding school. She had also drawn and held her sword as if with a trained hand.

Cases had occurred, he was aware, of women who had gone through campaigns without their sex being discovered. But these women were, or ought to be, widely different in mind and bearing from a girl of noble birth reared in wealth. His feeling of disgust grew stronger as he fully realised what she had done.

The girl's voice broke the pause. It was clear, musical, and free from defiance, but with a ring of courage in it that fixed his attention.

"You were, and still are, my prisoner," she began.

He shot a glance at her again, and knew she was acting, acting prettily, too, the part of a bright, daring boy.

"But a prisoner now would be in my way. Therefore, Sir — Count Pahlen, I think you said your name was—I restore you your liberty, your sword, and one of your pistols."

"You adhere to your wish to part?" said Pahlen.

"Certainly. We are enemies. Your way lies towards the Russians, mine to the French."

His eyes fell upon the wolf's track in the snow. "Do you know their line of march?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, with a fearless air; but he had caught the flash of doubt in her eyes, and knew she did not.

With a careless salute she swung round and rode off—rode off into that

endless waste, with its gristly horrors. Pahlen glanced again at the ominous track, and then gazed after her. If he was not to shame his manhood he must follow, and yet he did not want to.

"Unsexed little wretch!" he said to himself. "She is going to her death, and I have to save her."

Her scorn had hurt him once like a knife. It could never do so again, he thought. To him her uniform robbed her of all her woman's power.

There was irony, too, in the moment. Why should something bind him to her when both so desired their separation?—that something which, perhaps, was honour, or the instinct that makes a man protect a woman, and he had to obey it.

But he did not know how to force her to accept his escort till his own physical sufferings gave him the clue. By appealing to her sympathy—and that quality was left to her yet to judge by her care of both himself and her lancer—she might tolerate his presence. His wound had bled afresh

when he had carried her down the stair ; the frost had made the blood congeal, and stabs of pain pierced his shoulder.

He spurred forward, and she looked back as she heard his horse's hoofs. In another minute he was by her side, and pointed to his arm.

"You must let me go with you," he said, forcing a note of entreaty into his tone. "My arm is useless."

Her eyes clouded, and her face coloured vividly.

"Do you want the help of my sword?" she demanded.

"If you will give it to me. We can part when we get to a village."

She sat looking down at her horse's mane, perplexity on her face. He read her suspicion, and hastened, though half against his will, to remove it.

"The snow is about to fall. If we keep together till we get shelter we shall have less to fear from wolves and deserters."

She raised her eyes, and for an instant her gaze flashed upon him.

"Are you a coward?"

There was doubt more than inquiry in her tone.

"Yes, a damnable one."

"Oh, I can believe it! Very well, coward, lead the way."

He at once rode forward, aware that, in spite of her words, his wound was the scarlet thread that bound her to him. Soon the thoughts which their danger had kept in abeyance sprang up and held him. He saw his brief relief had been entirely premature. The girl had never been to Galicia; Warsaw must have been her destination, and the roll of armies had brought her hither to confound him.

From these thoughts sprang a darker one. His ruin was always a possibility while she lived. The tongue of the other woman had been silenced by a splendid marriage, but how long could he depend upon Halka's word? He felt Fate was playing with him; that there was something tigerish in its forcing him

to protect a girl whose safety might mean his own damnation.

He had never allowed himself to dwell upon the consequences of his acts. Consequences are such vague, uncertain things to most men till they call out to the world to behold them. He had trifled with his honour, and this was the revenge it had taken. The subtle whisperings of expediency had never really blinded his judgment. He had known when he made his choice that his one dominant wish was to keep all that made his life delightful. Sometimes a man gets pushed into a corner where his conscience has not elbow room, as it were, to fight. Then, in this world of tangled emotions, who is to help him?

Moreover, he had dared to fool the Emperor, a kindly, ardent Emperor, it was true, but none the less an autocrat. If the story reached Alexander's ears he had enough of the iron will and sense of personal dignity of the Romanoff's to order his dis-

missal from the guards, and his name to be struck off the roll of nobles.

His horse and Halka's had fallen into a walk. Neither he nor the girl had tasted food since the previous night. The frost was gripping the land, and objects loomed distinctly through the fog. The howl of a wolf came out somewhere from the dense atmosphere ; a minute later its form, vague as some ghostly terror, flitted past them. A brand of fire seemed pressed to his wound, and, burdened with Halka's presence, he did not know whither to go.

Then out of the chaos of his thoughts the plan of looking for a village and leading her there shaped itself. He would acquit his conscience of murder by letting her know before they parted that he had recognised her, and warn her of her danger. After that, if she still held to her mad career, he would be free of all responsibility. Upon her own head would be her fate.

Presently he looked back ; her face was pinched by cold and hunger, but

her eyes were still bright and fearless. Admiration began to mingle with his disgust, and a sudden wish to learn her story awoke in his mind. He tightened his rein and waited for her to come up, but she halted two paces behind him. This made him alight and examine his girths.

"He can tighten a strap," thought the girl as she watched him. "His wish for my sword is a ruse."

Up to the moment when he had burnt the despatch she had despised him most sincerely. But the sight of that courage which had made him risk his life for the sake of duty had caused her to modify her opinion. It was courage, perhaps, of the coarse, physical kind, and she had had proof that he lacked that higher bravery which is so rare. Still to be prompt and fearless in the face of death was a fine thing.

He turned towards her, lifting his eyes to her face.

"Are you a Czarlorisky?" he asked abruptly, mentioning the name of a great Polish family."

"No," she replied, looking straight between her horse's ears. The coolness of his tone annoyed as well as disconcerted her.

"You have made the wrong choice," he added. "Half the Polish nobles are in our service."

"Well, sir, what is that to you? My choice cannot concern you."

"What impudence," thought Pahlen. But she felt relieved. "Ah," she said to herself, "he does think I am a boy!" and the next instant despised him for not recognising her. She felt, however, oppressed by a sense of her girlhood every time he looked at her or spoke.

"An only son?" asked Pahlen, as he turned again to his traps.

"When you tell me your history, sir, you shall learn mine!"

"Very well," he answered, and, mounting his horse, rode by her side. Then, as they wandered on in the fog, he told her his name again, his military rank, his prospects, and the names of his best friends. A silence

followed this confidence, and the girl shivered in her saddle.

"And you?" he said at last.

"I? Oh, there 's nothing to tell. We have all been soldiers. My cousin refused to join the French, so I went."

She drew in her horse to let him take the lead. But he halted too, for his eyes had been attracted to what looked like a low cloud creeping over the veiled line of the horizon. The girl saw it also, and a second later knew that it was dark masses of men. Something leapt to her throat, and every pulse in her body beat quicker.

The next instant Pahlen seized her bridle, and, turning her horse about, led it towards a wood.

"The French?" she asked, her eyes dilated.

"No, the Russians," was all he answered.

For a moment she allowed him to lead the animal, then, suddenly recovering herself, tried to free her reins from his control.

"Let go, sir! You have deceived me. You are well able to defend yourself. Go to your friends!"

"We must keep together," he said, without altering the coolness of his tone, "unless you wish to be captured."

He knew—what she was ignorant of—that these soldiers would shoot her as an insurgent. It was that knowledge that had made him obey the impulse to seize her horse and lead her into the shelter.

Among the trees he dismounted, and guided both animals through the underwood. The girl still looked with impatience and disfavour at him; but at the same time she did not wish the Russians to see her. Poniatowski's Lancers had only recently been attached to Davout's light cavalry, and she had seen no action. She wondered if Pahlen meant to make her a prisoner. If he did it would conclusively prove that he had not recognised her, and for a second she almost hoped he would.

"Am I to give up my sword?"

she asked, in an indignant and agitated voice, as he halted both horses.

"To whom? To me?"

"Yes."

He was silent, but his eyes swept her face. A bright colour sprang to her cheeks. She looked above his head, determined not to let her eyes fall before his. Her gaze rested on a grey crow which was ruffling its feathers with cold among the branches.

The blush was the first sign of consciousness of sex that he had seen in her, he thought. She had the grace left to remember she was a woman.

"Not unless you wish it," he said. "I shall then send you back to your people."

A look of alarm sprang to her eyes.

"Ah, this is because I am a boy!" she exclaimed. "You would not dare treat a man like that! Prince Poniatowski did not think me too young for a command! He welcomed me the moment I entered Warsaw. Go! go to your Russians!"

"Hush!" he answered, quickly; for the grey-coated soldiers were drawing near.

"Go!" she repeated.

He looked at her again for a moment. Under her excitement he saw that it was a tired and half-frozen girl who was sitting in the saddle. He had no answer to make her, and turning away walked forward a few paces to a spot where he could see the soldiers through the trees.

A column of infantry passed first, marching steadily, the men keeping their ranks, though the whole body of troops was in rapid retreat. They came on in almost absolute silence, their feet producing a curious dull sound in the snow. As he looked at their faces, pinched by cold and fatigue, a sudden devil tempted him.

Leave the wood and join them, it said. *This girl will surely be ruin. If left alone she will meet her fate. Wolves, robbers, the bitter weather and Russian soldiers threaten her life. The cold, or the wolves, or man will kill her if you leave her now. Take*

the chance. Remember the fear at your heart.

The fog hung in wreaths among the trees and on the plain ; the troops grew less like living men, more shadowy and unreal as he listened to the voice. The white world round him had a chill, phantom-like appearance ; every outline was veiled or softened ; the track of a bird in the snow at his feet ran into the depths of the wood ; the mark of the claws conveyed the idea that something unhuman and evil had hovered over the place.

She had a sword, she was armed, why should she not find her way alone across the snow to a peasant's hut or the first French outpost? She had worn a uniform for three months, and had known the discomforts and perils of an army on the march. Why should he remain with her when she had the courage to defend her life? He drew himself up, and made a step forward. Some hussars were gliding on the outskirts of the trees looking like the ghosts of men and horses.

Pahlen stopped short. The thought that his horse and Halka's might neigh, and that she would be shot, struck him with curious distinctness.

He turned without any conscious effort of will, as if his muscles acted of their own accord, and went back to the girl.

An expression of mingled surprise, relief, and fear shot across her face as he took the reins and led both horses deeper into the wood."

"Officer," she called out from her saddle, "leave me and go."

But Pahlen noted that the indignation had all gone from her voice. During the few minutes she had been alone a terror had thrilled her; the terror of riding alone in the dark over the plains. She had heard the pursuing pack following hard on the heels of her jaded horse; and she knew her arm would be paralysed the moment those cries rang in her ears.

"I shall not leave you," he said with decision.

"What! when I tell you to go.

You forget your wound. Ride back or the Russians will have passed."

"I shall let them pass. Those men are in retreat. No! we ride together to-night for the sake of your body and my own soul."

"My body! your soul!" she exclaimed. "Look here, sir, do you know I am an officer in Poniatowski's Lancers? I have seen wounds and death! I can handle my sword as well as any man."

"On my soul I have no wish to go with you, but I must," he replied in a cold measured tone that took half her audacity away. "I don't doubt your courage, but—there is my wound."

He winced with actual pain, and though she was not quite certain whether he was making himself out worse than he was, a chord of sympathy vibrated in her heart.

"Stop!" however she cried. "I will not go farther into this black, hateful wood. There are ghouls and vampires here. Turn the horses round! What are you flying from?"

"From the devil," he said, tersely, but released her rein, and went round to his own horse.

The girl looked across his saddle at him and shivered. He rested his hand on the leather and looked back at her in the fast fading light; he felt a strange inertness creeping over his faculties.

"Was it Poniatowski's agent that made you a soldier?" he said suddenly.

"Partly. They wanted my name. The serfs would not rise unless a—unless I led them." Her reply came readily.

"And you brought them?"

"No. The cowards! They thought I was too young. Only four or five followed me."

As she spoke some tears came to her eyes. She was ashamed to brush them away lest he should see the action; she turned her head aside and opened and shut her lids to get rid of them. Her thoughts rushed back to the evening when she had gone through the marriage ceremony

with him; of his confession that had decided her destiny; of her dream that night when she had seemed to stretch her hand across the centuries to the mystic maid of Orleans.

"Little lad," said Pahlen, in a tone which she half resented even while it soothed her. "War is too bloody and hideous a game for you."

"I tell you again," she said, nettled, "I can face death. I have done it. I faced your sword last night. Did I show fear then?"

"Good God?" he gasped under his breath as the thought suddenly struck him that he had nearly killed her.

She rode on, and he mounted and followed her in the darkness. Night had fallen, and a wind with teeth of ice blew the horses' manes about their drooping necks, and bit under their riders' uniforms. The fog began to dissolve; the network of branches crept out in dimly visible lines; the white avenues that opened out through the trees melted off into the night.

The rigors of fever had seized Pahlen; he shivered and burnt; a sensation of mental inertness made him indifferent to what might befall him. The day's ride seemed a fevered dream; the sombre woods about them an interminable labyrinth; he and Halka, the ghosts of a husband and wife, blown together by some ghastly wind from the land of unrealities.

The consciousness that these fancies were caused by the fever in his body made his mind grope for his normal healthy self. He seemed to see it flitting close by his side, clothed in his own flesh, looking at him with sane, clear eyes. But it always eluded his grasp, though his gaze kept wandering to it.

He watched the movements of this double with a faint, curious interest, as it floated before his horse's head and passed through a black, crooked bar. Then in a moment the reins seemed to melt away in his hand, and his horse, the trees, the icy night were blotted out.

The eclipse was so brief that the

next minute he knew he was sitting upright in his saddle with Halka by his side. Something slipped away from his body, something that had supported him, as he grasped his reins and looked around.

"What has happened?" he asked. He felt as if a sudden change had come over him; as if in that darkness he had recovered his normal self, and had become once more alert with every sense under his control.

"Your head struck against a branch," answered Halka.

"What kept me from falling?"

There was no reply.

"Your arm? You took it away too quickly from a half-stunned man."

The darkness hid her features; he could only see the outline of her profile.

"Ah, I am glad we kept together," he said. "But for you I should be lying in the snow."

"Do you mean what you say?" she asked, suddenly, her eyes gazing

between the stark trunks of the trees. "Am I protecting you or you me?"

The ring of anxiety and doubt in her tone made him instantly answer:

"My sword arm is useless. I have already told you that."

"Then I am protecting you?"

"Yes."

They fell into silence, and after a while he heard her shiver again.

"Can you hold out much longer?" he said, with a sudden softening in his tone. The next second both instantly knew that his words were not in keeping with his declaration. A man's care for something weaker than himself lurked in his voice and manner.

"No doubt you are a great encumbrance," she answered with some spirit.

He half started.

"Lieutenant, you have no heart," he said, conscious of and resenting the feeling that he was hurt.

"Oh, war has not hardened me yet. I can help a wounded man. But what a fool you were not to join the Russians."

"She is acting," thought Pahlen, "and acting badly because she is not sure whether I know her or not."

"What can his tone mean?" the girl reflected. "Can he have recognised me?"

They had reached the edge of the wood. The fog had all but gone, and the stars were shining with a white, piercing light. The open plain lay in the foreground; trees vague and ghostly filled the middle distance, and beyond again were blurred, uncertain outlines and varying depths of darkness in which all the possibilities of the night might be hidden.

They rode out of the wood, and when some way across the plains noticed lights on their left. After scanning them for a few moments, Pahlen saw that they came from a village; the horses broke of themselves into a gallop, and it was not till they had swung round a grove of trees that he found that they were riding down on a camp.

Halka's horse had torn on ahead.

He dared not call out lest the outpost should hear him. What army lay before him he could not tell. A warm, luminous glow lit up the night from the camp fires. He made an effort with spur and rein to reach her side ; then a harsh voice in French rang out the challenge.

The instinct to escape made him drag on his reins fiercely. He could see Halka racing down on the vedette's levelled carbine, and it flashed through his mind that if he fled she would be shot.

There was no time to reason ; his action must be prompt. Either he must let her risk the bullet or give himself up as a prisoner. Almost mechanically he stood up in his stirrups and answered the challenge.

"Poniatowski's Lancers," he called out.

By this time Halka had controlled her horse, and he heard the vedette order her to stay where she had halted, and saw him signal to the picket. An oath rose to his lips as he pictured his long captivity.

Presently the officer in command of the picket and a few men came up, and he heard him order Halka to advance. As he saw the men surround her horse, the incongruity of her position revived his astonishment. He suddenly felt both repelled and attracted. Had she sufficient nerve left to act the young Polish noble before real soldiers? He almost forgot his own capture in the sensations that seized him as he watched the scene.

Her voice, without a tremble, came across the frosty night to his ears.

"Yes, captain," he heard her say. "He is my prisoner. A brave officer, I tell you. Saved me from robbers. I am Count Mnizek, of Poniatowski's Lancers. As a personal favour, let him have his liberty."

But even as she spoke the picket had surrounded Pahlen, and he gave up his weapons. He could hear the officer's reply.

"I should be enchanted to oblige you, Count, but it is impossible."

As he was brought up, he saw in

the starlight that her face was very pale.

"You will find plenty of your countrymen with us," remarked the captain, after he had asked Pahlen his name. "We have been chasing you Russians all day."

As this was superfluous information, Pahlen made no answer; his air was cold and composed. His heart, however, was on fire; he felt he must speak to the girl.

The party rode back to the outpost, where he and Halka were given in charge to a sergeant, who led them to the camp. There they were received by an officer who told Halka the troops were some three thousand horse, which, under Murat, had been pursuing the Russians since morning, and that the Emperor, who was leading the vanguard in person, would join them before dawn with a large body of troops.

"I wish to speak to the prisoner," she said, rather faintly, from sheer hunger and exhaustion.

"How did a lad like you capture

one of the Tzar's guards?" asked the officer.

"My men wounded him," she replied, and, getting off her horse, staggered and held by the saddle for a few moments. Pahlen had been ordered to alight. He wondered what she was going to say.

Presently she drew nearer to him, and spoke in Russian.

"I never wished you to be captured," she said, hurriedly. "You saved me from robbers. For a coward you have some bravery. Good-bye."

"Before you go," said Pahlen, "I should like to say——" He paused. The scene in the chapel rose before him. They stood again confronting each other, but every circumstance was altered. He now condemned, not she.

She was about to turn away as the pause continued, but his voice stopped her.

"The play is over," he said—"at least, with me. Do you know what your fate will be?"

"What?"

"When your heart has woman's blood running in it again you will die or go mad—that is, if our men do not kill you first."

He saw her start and draw a long breath. The noisy sounds of the camp seemed to blend into one great note in the pause that followed his words. Her head sank forward, and her hand hung clenched by her side.

"Oh, God! then you know!" she said, in a terrified tone; but before he could reply the French officer joined them. He was a smart-looking young hussar, whose pelisse hung jauntily over his shoulders.

"Come with me, Count," he said, politely. "My man has got a fowl and a bottle of wine for us."

"Basil Vassiliévitch," said Halka, in the same tone of anguish, in Russian, "do you mean to tell these men?"

The sergeant ordered him forward as she spoke.

"No," he replied, without looking

at her, as he moved away; "and I shall be damned yet for my silence."

Her voice followed him, but she was speaking to his guards.

"That officer is wounded, sergeant," she said, in gasps. "Let a surgeon attend to him at once."

Pahlen looked back; but she had turned so quickly away that his eyes failed to find her among the many moving figures. He felt then as if he were her executioner.

"Surgeon, indeed!" grumbled the sergeant by his side. "Worse wounds than yours have to wait. We came on so fast we did not think of surgeons. You 'll have one to-morrow. That 's a young cock of a Pole!"

He led him to a yard in the village in which the prisoners who had been captured during the day were confined. There was no shelter except under a mud wall. The guards had kindled a large fire, round which the Russians huddled. Many of them were wounded, but there was no one to attend to them. A few Russian officers formed a group apart, and

they greeted Pahlen, to whom they were all strangers. The party would be sent to the rear on the morrow, but many were likely to die from exposure and wounds before they reached Warsaw. The few huts of the village were occupied by Murat and his staff, and every one else had to camp in the open.

Pahlen stood for a few moments among the officers, hearing yet not hearing what they said. His thoughts dwelt on Halka. He had wished her dead at times, and yet he had risked his life and given up his liberty for her sake. He turned aside after a few moments, and lay down on the dirty, trampled snow.

V.

UP above him were the silver stars and great black, moving clouds. A yard from where he lay the showers of yellow sparks and the curling smoke danced and wreathed over the snow. The flickering light shone on the faces of the prisoners, most of them men who took their fate with something of sheep-like resignation, though here and there the impatient eyes of a boy looked round the group. Across the wall came the noise and stir of the camp, the whinnying of tethered horses, the ring of arms as the men cleaned their weapons, the sound of voices and oaths and songs. Then, as he stared and listened, while the pain in his wound became a fire and the blood rushed burning through his veins, the temptation sprang upon him again.

Of this he was assured, that if she died or were ruined his peace of mind would be restored. The sword that hung over his head would be removed ; his bigamy would never be discovered. To ruin her was easy. Only let it be known that she had taken up arms, had lived in the French camp, and he could obtain a divorce. If she told—as no doubt she would tell—his story no one would believe her. She was ignorant of the name of the other woman, and that other woman would lie worse than Sapphira to save her own position.

Then she ran daily the risks of war. If she lived to see the battle now so imminent, before night fell she might be dead, her body left as food for wolves. And here revulsion seized him, rushed through his soul, showed him the hell in his heart ; shame overwhelmed him ; his own fate became no longer important ; he saw her eyes looking at him again as they had done when he had killed the robber.

The temptation passed; and now it seemed to him that his hold upon realities was weakening, and that all the sights and sounds around him were fading off into unfathomed distances. Yet he was tormented by the question whether he should tell the French that Halka was a woman. Her position was terrible as well as singular. The scales in which her life was weighed were equally and horribly balanced. If he did speak, and she were cast adrift by the French and captured by the Russians, her fate would be as pitiless and cruel as any evil he had already imagined. She might escape death, but only for an imprisonment in one of the water-logged dungeons of St. Peter and St. Paul, or the terrors of Siberia. "I must be silent," he groaned; "but as I am a living man I will save her."

The figures of the prisoners and guards seemed dissolving into shadows; he could see the forms that hover round delirium stealing up the byways from the lands that lie so

close to death. Nothing moved or lived except those phantasms and the fever leaping in his veins; but his purpose to save the girl grew and strengthened, and he never lost hold upon that thought during the moments he was conscious.

So he lay through the night with now and then great blots of darkness falling on him. Then life would leap up in his veins again, and he saw through dizzying leagues of space, and heard so far that the whispers of the dead in distant islands and worlds sounded in his ears.

Once the clouds rolled back and fled across the sky before a great form that arose with flaming wings and strode the circle of the zodiac. It drew a fiery star from space and marked the brows of the sleeping soldiers with a sigh. He could see all over the camp, and the star was on two thousand men; and every one who had it was to die among the plains and forests of the war-swept land. Then he saw the portent growing fainter as it trod the black,

gold-spangled sky in the wake of the Russians, and his hand went to his own brow to touch the sign, but his fingers wandered over his burning flesh uncertain whether the mark of doom was there or not.

When the trumpets rang through the camp he staggered to his feet and stared at the creeping dawn as a man might who thinks the Day of Judgment has come. The prisoners were grouped by the wall, and the guards were sharing some cold potatoes with them. One of the Frenchmen offered him two half-frozen, whitish-blue lumps.

"God knows when we shall get anything to eat again," the man remarked. "Helped down with melted snow it 's not so bad."

Pahlen shook his head—hunger had left him; but he took a deep draught from the pannikin of water.

"Can you tell me where Count Mnizek is?" he asked anxiously.

"Who? Count Mnizek? Never heard of him. Do you mean one of those rascally Poles that have the

impudence to call these mud-fields their country?"

"Ah! the gentleman means the Polish boy who came into camp last night bringing an officer of the Tzar's guards a prisoner with him," observed the sergeant.

"Yes," replied Pahlen, eagerly. "What has become of him?"

"The Prince sent for him. His highness is very fond of the Poles just now. He wants them to make him their king. It 's an odd taste. By God! I don't envy him these mud-plains."

"And the Count?"

"Made a supernumerary on the Prince's staff. The lad is a great noble with thousands of serfs. Ah, bah! what barbarians you Russians and Poles are with your slaves; we 'll teach you another story now. *Vive la liberté!* Well, our pet, our idol, our golden eagle, our Murat thinks the lad can give him a shove towards the crown, so he 's to dangle on the staff a bit."

Pahlen started and shivered. Was

this part of his fever? Could anything so terrible have happened?

"Is this true before God?" he said, staring dizzily at the man.

"True before the little corporal who is greater than God," returned the soldier. "Were you his prisoner, M. l'officier?"

Pahlen looked past him, unable to speak. The man's news seemed incredible. Could Murat and the sharp-eyed men who composed his staff be so dull as to accept Halka's boyhood as a fact? The Prince's staff had a reputation of its own in the French army, and Pahlen knew what that reputation was. The officers were the most extravagant and reckless of all the men who formed the various staffs of the marshals. Cards or dice were in their hands every moment that they could spare from their duties. How could any boy, how could——In the name of God, he thought, how could she hold her own with such companions and not be discovered. Then the shame of it! Her mingling with these men;

the sullying of her innocence, the degradation of the position. He felt a sudden passion of rage and personal shame seize him as fierce and keen as if she had really borne his name.

It died away presently, leaving him in the dull stupor of fever. A few minutes later the officer in command of the detachment that was to guard the prisoners came into the yard, and orders were shouted out. The Russian officers were formed in a body by themselves, and the prisoners were then turned into the street. Pahlen thought they were going to march, but just then a staff officer galloped up, and all the prisoners were pushed back and their guards formed in line. A Cossack captain drew his attention to the plain, where dense masses of men were moving, and told him that the Emperor was coming. Suddenly he heard the clatter of hoofs, and the next minute Murat, followed by a large staff, galloped past.

The brilliant group went by so rapidly that, though he tried to keep

his reeling senses together and scan each rider, it seemed to him that he saw a dozen Halkas and yet no girl. The thud of hoofs, the scattered snow, and the rush of wind came to him as things he felt and heard and saw from a slope, down which he was slipping into unfathomed depths. He made a desperate effort to control his failing powers, to retain his hold on life, and his eyes followed the Prince and his staff with a fixed and rigid stare.

He could see a knot of men riding at the gallop across the plain, led by an officer in a grey coat. All the brilliant colours of both groups of riders seemed to flash and mingle together, each hue intensely vivid in contrast to the white ground. Then the swords flashed in salute like brief shafts of dazzling light, and Murat drew rein by the man in grey. A second later the Prince and his staff fell into place among the Emperor's retinue; and as Napoleon spurred forward, a shout went up from the cavalry, that startled the wild swans

overhead, and sent the wolves far into the depths of the forest. A piercing wind smote the marrow of men. Pahlen could see them through the few flakes of snow that were beginning to fall, sitting frozen on their saddles. Gaunt, half-starved, war-worn, they sat there ready to die for the man who was treading his own terrible destiny over the lives of thousands without regret or remorse. A minute later a voice harsh and penetrating rang in his ear ; the prisoners were formed into order, and the march to the rear began.

That night he opened his eyes to find himself lying on a bed of straw in a peasant's hut. A dark-skinned woman bent over him ; her hand made the sign of the cross as their gaze met.

"Is the gracious officer better?" she said, looking curiously at his face.

He did not answer ; his mind was grouping in strange confusion, and he could not yet recall what had happened.

"The gracious Pom will live," said the woman, turning to some one behind her. A man's voice growled out a reply, and Pahlen saw a tall peasant examining his boots by the light of a small, evil-smelling lamp.

"Where am I?" he said, and then tried to answer the question himself as he closed his eyes and saw shapes evolving from the black cloud which he seemed to see so plainly, and which he said to himself was oblivion. The endless waste of snow, the long string of prisoners, the flakes resting on the weapons of the guards, these things he saw; then Halka, bright and daring in her lancer uniform, sprang up before him and shook a lance in his face; then the fire and mirth died out of her eyes, tears gathered in them; her look of eloquent appeal made him start up with his hand stretched out to grasp hers.

The woman forced him back on the bed. "You are in the hands of God," she said, answering his question; and she turned and spoke fiercely to the man behind her.

"Leave those boots alone!" she cried. "The blood in your heart is black water, Jan Brodiskow!"

A curse and a growl answered, and Pahlen sank into unconsciousness again. By the second day the fever left him, and he was able to sit up in his bed and talk to the woman. There was a tender gleam in her solemn black eyes that told him that she was human and true.

She had taken his uniform and hidden it, covering his shoulders with a Frenchman's cloak, as Napoleon was master of all the country round. All day the men who had fallen out during the long marches were passing in groups and sometimes in companies and troops, to get up with their regiments. These stragglers occasionally stopped at the door of the hut and demanded either food or drink. Some of them noticed Pahlen, but the woman told them passively that he was a Frenchman.

Her husband was out each day from the first gleam of light till night fell. He often brought in blood-

stained uniforms and boots, and laid these spoils in a corner of the hut till at last the heap became very large. Pahlen could look at it from where he lay, and some of the clothes retained the shape of the dead soldiers' bodies. At times he almost fancied that he saw a hand or a foot thrust out from the sleeves and trousers, and at first, before his strength returned, he could not get rid of a consciousness of vague forms under the clothes. He thought the man, whenever he met his eyes, looked disappointed that he had not died too.

"The gracious officer knows that I saved him," he said once or twice, as he stood by Pahlen's side. "It was growing dark, and I saw the French taking their prisoners along the field. I had gone out to dig the sledge track, and my eyes fell upon you in the snow. Oh, I hurried down, you may be sure, and when I drew off your boots you groaned, and I remembered God and carried you to my house. Your high nobility will not forget what I have done."

"You shall be paid," Pahlen always answered. The French soldiers had emptied his pocket the night of his capture, and he had not even a rouble to offer the man.

Each day, as he grew stronger, his resolve to save Halka became more firmly settled in his mind. He had moments when the thought of her position filled him with such horror that in order to calm himself he would try to occupy his mind with the things around him, and watch the woman cooking at the stove, or count the brown rafters or the holes in the mud floor. Again and again he formed plans of how he could meet her, plans which each one contained the possibility of his own capture and death.

Now and then a frightened peasant came in with rumours of the armies, but the stories were so absurd that he knew that they were false. He had been seven days in the hut when a man in a dirty, threadbare caftan came across the threshold. His greasy side-locks and forked beard shook as he darted towards the corner where

the peasant was counting the uniforms.

"And for these, and these, you want five florins!" he exclaimed, taking up each garment and shaking it. "Brodiskow, it 's as true as God 's in heaven that I could not get three for these blood-stained rags."

"I said fifteen," said the peasant, doggedly. "The boots may have holes, but look at this cloak! It was a colonel's."

"Fifteen!" shrieked the Jew, as if he had been stung, and he cast the hussar pelisse he held in his hand on the ground. "Fifteen! you ask fifteen, when by to-morrow or the day after there will be hundreds and tens of hundreds of dead men to be plucked at Eylau and Rothenen!"

The words roused Pahlen.

"A battle!" he exclaimed, starting up. "When? To-morrow?"

But the Jew took no notice of him, and went on examining the uniforms.

"Fifteen!" he began, but Pahlen sprang out of bed, a sudden vigour in all his limbs.

"You dog! answer me at once!" he cried.

His tone and threatening air showed the Jew in a moment that he was in the presence of the ruling race. Abject and frightened he bent before him, his hand still grasping a braided jacket.

"Pardon, your high nobility, pardon," he murmured. "I did not hear your high nobility. What can I do for the gracious officer? Ah, the battle," he added, hurriedly, at a sign of impatience from Pahlen. "My cousin Naftali brought the news, and he is a man who never lies save in business. He said to me an hour ago that the Russian rear-guard had been destroyed. The rest of the army is drawn up at Landsberg, and a great battle is about to take place. He rode a fast horse and had seen these things himself."

Pahlen turned to the woman and demanded his uniform. He felt strangely invigorated, as if the tidings he had heard had restored him to his full strength. The certainty that Halka would be in the coming hell

filled him with unutterable horror, so that between his wish to save her and a fierce desire to join the Russians before the battle, he touched such heights and depths of passion, despair, and hope as made him forget his surroundings ; and that he was rushing out of the hut on certain danger. Every soldier whom he met would either be a Frenchman or belong to one of Napoleon's allies.

But the woman remembered it, and as soon as he had dressed and left the hut, she tore a cuirassier's cloak and cap from the heap of uniforms and ran after him, indifferent to the yells of her husband and the Jew.

"Take these," she cried, "and may the life I kept in you escape in battle and flight!"

He flung the cloak across his shoulders, and set out over the fields, following the road which had been cut through the snow. Now and then he thought he heard distant cannonading ; and as night was falling he hastened to the nearest village in the hope of being able to get a horse

and a sword. But the peasants stared stupidly at him, and swore that neither horse nor weapon was to be bought at any price. He was about to turn away in disgust, when the Jew touched his arm.

"I knew what the gracious captain would want," he said, in a shrill nasal tone, "therefore I followed him. If your high nobleness will come round here I will show you a horse with the beauty and speed of an angel."

He led Pahlen to the back of a hut, and there sure enough was a horse which, if no beauty, looked strong enough for his purpose. The Jew accepted a paper duly signed and witnessed, and brought Pahlen the sword of a Russian infantry officer.

The next day Pahlen followed in the track of the armies, guided by the sound of firing. The two wings of the French army were still in the rear, and he had to avoid both Ney's and Davout's columns. The cloak and cap enabled him to escape detection at a distance, but he had often to take refuge in a wood from bodies

of stragglers. When night fell he rode into a small town nearly deserted of its inhabitants, but where he managed to obtain food and shelter.

Long before the first glimmer of dawn he was again in the saddle. By eight o'clock he heard the guns open, as he judged, on the Russian side, and knew he was too late for the battle. Very soon the cannonading from both armies grew into one continuous roar, and though the fight was taking place at the distance of many leagues, and the French were between him and the Russians, he rode on as fast as his horse could gallop, reckless whether the enemy saw him or not.

The thought that Halka, if still alive, was somewhere in that infernal scene, made him desperate and absolutely indifferent to his own fate. Pictures of the girl froze themselves into his brain. He saw her go mad and shriek out till those around her knew she was a woman; he saw—what really happened—the charge of Murat's squadrons into the heart of

the Russians ; he could see her left behind, reeling, frenzied, or borne on in the crush of the charge, unable to strike a blow for her life.

The snow came down at intervals and hid the track from his sight. Sometimes his horse stumbled over the bodies of men and horses half buried in the drift. Now and again he had to halt, unable to tell where he was in that mad white world, while all the time the din of the guns rang in his ears. At such moments his excitement to know how the battle was going got almost beyond his control, and he went through thrills of emotion that were like physical pain.

As the day closed in and no broken ranks of the French came pouring across the country, he feared the worst. The firing had lessened ; and by night had altogether ceased. A blaze of light had sprung up against the sky as he rode down a ravine and came across a group of peasants who were talking noisily and pointing at the glow.

"That is Eylau," he heard them

say ; and another, " I have a cousin there. He is bed-ridden and could not fly."

They looked round as Pahlen came up, he and his horse standing out like one black shadow against the snow.

" Has any one news ? " he asked, looking down at the silhouette-like forms that grouped round his bridle.

" Yes, highness, the Russians are killed to a man, not one left. Oh, such slaughter ! "

" Will any one here go to Eylau on an errand for me ? " he inquired.

The black figures stirred, but no one answered for a minute. Then a young man laid his hand on Pahlen's knee. " Yes, excellency," he said.

Pahlen moved a few paces off, the man joined him, and the bargain was quickly made. He promised the Jew everything he asked, and would have added his own soul if the man had demanded it. Then he rode down the hillside to the village, and dismounting, entered one of the cottages.

It was morning before the messenger returned, and during those

hours Pahlen had seen Halka die a dozen deaths, ghastly, torturing, unthinkable. Underneath this turmoil of his thoughts lay a sullen sense of shame and defeat. He had yet to learn that the French had suffered almost as severely as the Russians.

He met the man at the door, and saw on his arm the cause of his delay. The Jew had been robbing the dead, and handed his booty to an old man before he answered Pahlen.

"Oh, excellency, it is all blood and snow and fire," he cried, raising his plump, stained hands. "A Gehenna indeed! Before God it is true the Russians have been killed off to but a few men, and they have gone to Königsberg. Prince Murat has followed them. I know not whether Count Mnizek is alive or dead."

It flashed instantly across Pahlen that he must ride after Murat. He scarcely thought of the danger of such an adventure. It was imperative, he said to himself, to learn Halka's fate. The Jew had told him that he had sold spirits to the

French; and it struck Pahlen that here was the messenger by whom he could communicate with the girl if she were still alive. He asked the man if he would accompany him.

The Jew consented, and went away to look for a horse. While he was absent, Pahlen examined his own girths and bridle-straps with care. He felt now cool and collected, though the irony of facing a hostile army for the sake of a woman whose rescue might mean his ruin, and who certainly would be in his way, struck him once or twice.

On starting, he soon found that they could only journey by night. In the day they had to hide in the woods to avoid the main body of the French, which was retiring from Eylau. But once beyond the village he was able to ride directly in Murat's track.

Day was breaking when he reached the neighbourhood of Königsberg. He drew up in a birch wood whence he could see the town, and was amazed to find that Murat had had the audacity to make an attempt to besiege it.

As the nearest picket was not far from the wood, his companion advised him to seek shelter in one of the huts that stood a few yards off. They were inhabited by Jews, who clung to their homes in spite of the passing and repassing of armies, and a cousin of his guide lived in one.

The sun had not yet risen, and securing their horses, they left the wood. The Jew received them civilly, and told them that he and some others were admitted at certain hours into the French lines with drink. This was just as Pahlen wanted.

Obtaining the uniform of a French dragoon from the man, he was enabled to examine the ground in the neighbourhood of the camp. There was a pond on the side nearest to the huts, partly surrounded by a wood; a vedette posted on the outskirts of the trees made it impossible to reach the place in the daytime. Here, however, he determined to meet Halka at night if she were still alive.

When he returned to the hut, he

wrote a few words in Slav to the girl.

Ten minutes later the younger Jew set out, as his cousin's assistant, with the note and two large jars of spirits, for the camp.

Pahlen waited in keen impatience for his return. The first words of his report reassured him. Count Mnizek had come alive and unwounded through Eylau, and was still acting on Murat's staff. The man then paused.

"The letter, excellency," he continued, glibly, "I gave into the hands of a man, servant to an officer on the staff, who will deliver it to Count Mnizek. It will be quite safe, highness," he added, as he saw Pahlen frown. "I gave the man a pint of spirits for himself. He thinks it is an intrigue. 'Oh,' he said, 'the Polish boy is a gay little devil with the pretty face of a girl. The staff pet him. He is a gay little devil.' He said that, highness. He will give the note."

Pahlen's frown deepened, and he turned aside. At that moment he

felt more repelled than attracted by Halka. She must be utterly unsexed, he thought, and the men called her "a gay little devil!"

He went into the hut and stayed brooding there for a time.

But his mood changed before night came. He said to himself that she was under a curse and not accountable for what had happened. His duty was to save her.

He had felt sure at first that she would meet him; as the hours passed he grew less confident. She was able to act the man with sufficient audacity while she thought him ignorant of her sex; but whether she would be able to do so now that she knew he was aware she was a woman, was another matter. He recalled her blush when he had looked at her in the wood. He was half afraid that the thought of her uniform would keep her away from him.

He looked at his watch and answered the Jew, when the man with some hesitation asked him if he were to accompany him to the camp.

"No," he said in a curt, decisive tone; "if I am not back by morning, take your papers into Königsberg."

He walked to the door and went out into the night with as cool a step as if about to appear on parade.

The moon was shining over the town, but the sky was full of black, moving clouds, and now and then the darkness fell like a curtain. Every time the moon came out he lay down on the frozen snow; every time it was obscured he ran on to get between the pickets, holding his scabbard in his hand.

He crossed a road, and then a field which rose in a slight incline towards the pond. The darkness enabled him to hurry up this rise unseen. In a few minutes he knew he had got past the picket, and walked boldly forward, trusting that the sight of his uniform would prevent any one from asking him for the countersign.

A few yards brought him near the wood; the vedette faced the town; a cast-iron looking equestrian figure against the watching night. Pahlen

steps became slow and deliberate ; a corner of the moon shone out through a rift like a jagged knife-thrust in the black drifting clouds. A step more and he was among the trees. The undergrowth showed in a white, ghostly glimmer ; all around him was still.

CHAPTER VI.

THE men of Murat's personal staff were quartered in some hastily constructed huts of brushwood and wattles, close to the small, ruined farmhouse, occupied by the Prince and the generals on his staff. When Pahlen took his life in his hand and entered the camp, about seven or eight young men were gathered in one of these huts playing at cards.

A charcoal fire warmed the place in a measure, but the icy air came through a dozen crevices. Most of the men were cloaked ; but one, an officer with an unhealed scar on his cheek, had flung his aside. He was slightly drunk, though his manner scarcely showed any sign of intoxication, and his eyes were singularly clear and hard. A lantern stood on a plank, which, raised on props, served

the party as a table. The money staked was very high ; but no one seemed excited over the issue of the games. Men had lost and won enormous sums with perfect coolness that night. The uncertainty of their lives had killed the gambler's fever.

The man with the scar presently flung aside his cards. Leaning back against the wattles, he lit his pipe with an air of deliberation. The other aides-de-camp continued to play.

"Where is Mignon?" he said, suddenly.

"He went to see Bidelaux," answered an officer named La Bourdonnaye.

"Have any of you noticed his peculiarity?"

"If you mean that he has the face of a girl and the wealth of a Grand Duke, yes."

"Not that," said the man. "Mignon has an idiosyncrasy."

"A love affair? Come on, Pallisseaux, it is your deal," called out a fair-haired man sharply.

"Oh, hang your cards! Listen to me. We can get some amusement out of it. Little Mignon can be baited if we like."

"How?"

"Why, where the devil have all your eyes been? Chastaniè, you know that story of De Foy?"

Chastaniè, the fair-haired captain, was making some calculations and did not answer.

"What was it?" said La Bourdonnaye. He had bold black eyes and a handsome face.

"Chastaniè knows; he saw it. But apart from that I have seen the same thing too."

"What thing?"

"The boy will not let a friend salute him. You know Duchamp—how excited he gets? Well, after our last cannon had ceased at Eylau, and the Russians were flying, he rushed up to Mignon and was about to fling his arms round his neck when the young rascal jumped back and blew him a kiss. Now, Chastaniè, your story!"

The fair-haired captain was still murmuring to himself. Suddenly he looked up, his blue eyes cool and smiling.

"You owe me a hundred thousand francs, La Bourdonnaye. Are you going to pay to-night?"

The handsome aide-de-camp twirled his moustache.

"To-morrow," he remarked laconically; then briskly, "What about De Foy?"

"Oh, he had a passage with Mignon, that's all," and Chastaniè took up the cards again.

"What about the boy's manner," said a short, resolute-looking man, the senior officer of the staff. "Is it true he will never embrace a friend?"

"Quite true," replied Pallisseaux.

"There's something in it certainly," remarked Chastaniè. "The General had once been intimate in Paris with some of the lad's relations. As soon as he learnt his name, he stepped forward to embrace him. And what do you think the young

devil did? Drew back adroitly and kissed De Foy's hand."

"Mon dieu! No. What can have been his object!"

"He did; with the face of a lamb. Then, with the coolest impudence, told De Foy that he had made a vow to some outlandish Polish saint not to kiss or be kissed by any one but a girl."

"And the general?"

"Turned on his heel and reported him to the Prince. The Prince asked him what he meant. 'His Excellency should shave, your Highness,' was all the young rascal said. 'My cheeks trembled at the thought of his bristles.' The Prince tried to frown, but the boy's cool impudence amused him."

"It was well he was a Pole, though," remarked the senior officer; and the men turned to their game.

Pallisseaux watched the cards as they turned up for a few minutes; a thin veil of tobacco smoke floating round his head. Presently he took his pipe from between his lips.

"I mean to cure Mignon of his peculiarity," he said, shortly. "The boy shall break his vow to-night."

"A wager?" said Chastaniè.

"Yes. Twenty thousand francs upon my making Mignon kiss or be kissed by one of us to-night."

"Very good," answered Chastaniè; "I 'll take the bet, and I shall win."

"Any one else?" said Pallisseaux, coolly.

A chorus of voices answered him; most of the men laid their money on the boy.

"He 's such a young devil," said La Bourdonnaye, "he will get out of it somehow. Though what the deuce can make him object!"

"Send some one for him," said Pallisseaux.

"He will suspect something if you do," observed Chastaniè. "He 's as keen as a lance."

"Yes, yes, wait till he comes in," cried the rest of the men.

"He ought to be here in ten minutes," said Chastaniè, glancing at his watch; come on with the cards!"

The game continued and absorbed the men's attention. Pallisseaux alone seemed to be on the alert for any sign of the boy. He had a clean-cut face, handsome in spite of the scar, but with something cold and merciless in his eyes and the lines of his lips.

"Here he comes," he called out to the men.

The next instant the horse-cloth that was hung across the opening was raised, and a boy in a long fur-lined cloak came in. He walked up the limited space with a swagger.

"Hallo, Mignon, come here!" said Pallisseaux, bending forward, and laying a large, well-shaped hand on the plank. The men looked up from their game.

The boy drew up and stamped his foot; a pink flush mounted his face.

"I have told you not to call me that name!" he exclaimed. "How dare you? It 's not the name for a man!"

A laugh broke from the players, but Pallisseaux only smiled, gazing at

him with his keen eyes as he twisted the fine point of his moustache.

"Here, Mnizek," called out La Bourdonnaye, "come and share our last bottle of Bordeaux. The very last. To-morrow we shall be driven to snow. Think of that, my beauty! What, you won't drink, you young fool! I thought I had taught you the trick."

"Give him some of his pig's lemonade! Where 's that bottle of *wodhi?*"

The boy glanced from face to face with a bright, daring expression, then sat down on the bank of earth that served as a seat. "If any man calls me Mignon again I shall challenge him," he remarked with youthful truculence, blinking his eyes as he looked at the lantern.

"There is a general order against duelling till the campaign is over," laughed La Bourdonnaye. "What do you say to that, my cock-sparrow?"

"Oh, no one minds it. Honour before obedience," replied the boy.

The men were looking at Pallisseaux, who appeared not to notice the expectancy in their eyes. He sat next to the boy, on the left side. He continued to point his moustache for a few minutes, then suddenly leant towards him and put his arm round his shoulder.

"Mignon, you shall not fight me," he said, with deliberate coolness. "We shall be friends. You shall kiss my cheek in token of our amity."

A slight movement ran round the staff; amused, interested eyes were bent on the pair. The boy drew back quickly, flicking his fingers in Pallisseaux's face.

"What! be friends with you?" he cried, in a gay, half-defiant tone. "If I am handsome, you are an ogre with that cut across your cheek. Besides, you are drunk!"

Pallisseaux smiled. "Here, Chastaniè, give me that Bordeaux," he said.

The bottle was passed, and Pallisseaux held it up to the light. He

swore. "There 's not enough left to make Mignon drunk," he exclaimed.

"Not such an easy thing," said the boy. "I have the head of a rock. And you have called me Mignon again. I *will* challenge you, and the Prince may cashier me if he likes."

Pallisseaux put down the bottle. "Mignon," he remarked, speaking slowly and twisting his moustache. "I shall have to whip you yet. A big Russian rushed upon me brandishing his sword. He laid my cheek open, but I sliced his head off. By heavens, yes! I sent him down to the shades. Now kiss the scar; at once, and apologise."

The boy broke into a laugh. "You are hideous, Pallisseaux," he observed, with bright, audacious eyes. "You ought not to sit by the handsomest man in the hut."

"Nom de Dieu! Do you call yourself a man?"

"What else?—and the handsomest, too, on the staff. You all tell me I am pretty. Don't you, La Bourdonnaye? Wait till you see what the

girls of France will think of me. Oh, I shall break their hearts, you may wager." He put his hand up to his lips and twirled away at an imaginary moustache.

"They will put you in their pockets," remarked the senior officer of the staff. "They 'll hold you up for their lovers to whip. Are you going to apologise?"

"What? Admit that Pallisseaux is handsome?"

"No; kiss the scar."

"When he smells less of drink," replied the boy, audaciously. "What are you fellows doing over there? Why don't you go on with your game?"

No one answered for a moment. Then Chastaniè spoke.

"A foil," he said, quietly. "It 's your deal again, Pallisseaux."

"In a minute," the latter replied, significantly, and sat brooding for a few seconds. Then he started.

"What day is this?" he asked, as if suddenly remembering something.

He was told. "Ah, the anni-

versary!" he exclaimed. "Have you all forgotten it?"

A look of intelligence flashed round the group unseen by the boy.

"Great Heavens! yes," cried La Bourdonnaye. "Chastanié, do you remember it?" There was a second's hesitation in the fair-haired captain's eyes, then they answered in the affirmative. Every man instantly assumed an air of enthusiastic interest.

Finding the staff with him, Pallisseaux rose to his feet.

"Comrades," he said, coolly, taking up the cup of a flask, and pouring the last of the wine into it. "We had all but forgotten a duty. This day, as we know, is kept by the Prince's staff. We send the Loving Cup round." He paused for a moment while a light danced into the men's eyes. "This cup must do instead of our gold flagon. But what matter! We are soldiers all! Here's to the *Emperor*, *our Prince*, *Glory*, *and Women!* Vive l'empereur!"

He raised the cup to his lips as

every officer sprang up echoing the cry. He barely touched the rim, and then kissing lightly the cheek of the man on his left, gave him the cup. The officer sipped, kissed the aide-de-camp next him, and passed on the cup.

Eager, amused eyes were fixed on the boy. La Bourdonnaye sat last on the opposite side; the Count was higher up on the left hand. His bright gaze never flinched as he watched the cup pass from man to man. Presently it was La Bourdonnaye's turn and he took it.

"Vive l'empereur!" cried the boy, with sudden inspiration; and placing one foot on the plank he bent forward as if to give his cheek to La Bourdonnaye. The next second the prop gave way, and lantern and cards were flung on the ground. His hand had half grasped the cup; it fell from between his fingers and those of the aide-de-camp.

When the plank was raised and the light set on it again, all eyes except the boy's were turned on

Pallisseaux. His second attempt had failed.

"What did you do that for?" he said, his tone perfectly cool but hard, looking at the boy.

"Why! Because we drink toasts like that in Poland," was the innocent reply. "Every man puts his foot on his chair."

"But not on a rickety plank, you young fool! You have missed the Loving Cup."

"By an accident," remarked Chastaniè.

"And the wine 's spilt!" returned the boy, regretfully. "However, vive l'empereur! Here 's to Glory and Women! La Bourdonnaye, what clumsy fingers you have got."

Pallisseaux sat down, but returned the men's gaze with a confident smile. He then drew out a pencil and a piece of paper, and scribbling a few words on it, tossed it across to Chastaniè. The latter read it, and passed it on to the man next him.

Pallisseaux re-lit his pipe and

smoked for a few moments. Presently he put it down and swore at the tobacco and the man who had sold it to him. The boy, who had been watching the progress of the paper as it went from hand to hand, drew out a cigar with a smile.

"Try this," he said, blandly. "I spend thousands of florins every year on choice Havanas."

Pallisseaux took no notice; he caught the look of approval in the men's eyes, and leant back against the wattles.

"Mignon," he drawled, "I have not yet forgiven the insult to my scar. I require an apology, but at the same time I am ready to leave the matter to chance. We shall settle it with dice. Three tosses each. If I lose I will not call you Mignon again. If you, you have to kiss the sword cut on my cheek."

The boy hesitated; doubt flashed into his eyes for a moment, then he laughed.

"Try it," he said, but his face had grown red.

"Where are the dice? Hand them over here," said Pallisseaux.

As he spoke the curtain was raised, and a servant came in. There was barely room for him to pass between the plank and the seat, and he hesitated.

"Well, what is it, Michaud?" asked La Bourdonnaye, looking at the man.

"A letter for Count Mnizek, sir," the servant replied.

"A letter!" cried the boy, starting and growing blood red. "How did it come?"

The servant, a large-jowled, dull-eyed man, hesitated. Then he remembered his bribe, and set his few wits to work.

"Captain Houdelet brought it," he said, glibly.

The boy stretched out his hand.

"Where is Captain Houdelet?" asked one of the officers.

"With the Prince, sir. He has just come from Osterode."

"Ah! that means the recall," remarked the aide-de-camp.

"Give me the note," said La Bourdonnaye. As he was nearest to the door, the request was natural enough. The man obeyed, and La Bourdonnaye passed it to the boy. As he did so Pallisseaux took up the dice and tossed.

"Wait!" cried the boy, eagerly. "I am not ready."

"Your first love letter, Mignon?" sneered Pallisseaux. "Very well. But you 'll have to show us the note." The servant backed to the door.

"Michaud!" called out La Bourdonnaye, sharply, "if you don't invent better lies I shall discharge you. You bungling fool! Captain Houdelet will be here in a minute. Your story will have its bottom kicked out of it then."

The man stammered, "Pardon me, sir. You are right, sir. I will think of another lie," he said. "It was given me by a suttler who remarked——"

"Go to the devil!" cried his master. "What use is that idiot to me," he added, as the man disappeared,

"if he can't lie better than that over a *billet-doux*. Well, Mnizek, what does the girl say?"

The boy turned his back on the men. The moonlight came through an opening in the wattles and fell on his paper. A look of terror flashed into his eyes as he read. A shower of laughter and chaff had followed his action. Then the next minute he swung round, and, facing the aides-de-camp, twirled his absent moustache.

"Is she pretty?" "Who is she?" "What a young devil!" "What! have you already fascinated the wide-hipped frauleins?" "That comes of a baby face!" greeted his ears as he gazed straight at the group.

"Messieurs, an affaire de cœur," he said, with an audacious smile.

"A Jewess in one of the huts?" asked Pallisseaux, taking up the dice.

"Oh, much higher game," smiled the boy. "But honour forbids my saying anything more. Who tosses first?"

"We shall retire from Königsberg to-morrow," observed the senior officer. "Your affaire de cœur will be brief."

"So much the better. I prefer war to love. She 'll weep. But girls have often done that for me.—You throw, Pallisseaux."

"Give me the note," said La Bourdonnaye. "You know nothing of love. I 'll teach you what to do."

"Part with it! never. Here! I will read what she says. But no name, comrades, no name!" With perfect coolness and an untrembling hand the boy held up the note and began.

"*Count Mnizek*—How did she get my name I wonder?—*forgive the despair and love that forces me to write to you*—That 's pretty, is n't it?—*but*——"

"Stop," said Pallisseaux, coolly; "we don't want any more of that. Come! no more fooling. Attend to the dice."

The boy crumbled the note in his left hand, glanced triumphantly

around; and then watched Pallisseaux as he threw. All the men bent forward.

"Six!" remarked Chastaniè. "Now, Mnizek."

The boy's eyes still danced with a bright, mischievous light. "A libation to the Fates!" he cried, raising the cup from the ground and holding it over the dice. "Here, Pallisseaux! you who don't believe in the gods, see what the Sisters will do for me."

He tossed, and laughed. The rays from all the watching eyes seemed to meet on the spot where the dice fell.

"Five," said Pallisseaux, coldly. "Your gods—which, by the by, are not gods—are asleep."

"No, no! Only trying my faith," replied the boy, and his eyes turned upon Chastaniè, who was darting keen glances of interest from him to Pallisseaux. "Chastaniè, is it not so?" he asked.

"Without doubt," answered the latter. "The way of all women,

hideous or pretty. Ah! it's over the plank," he added, as Pallisseaux threw.

"Where is it? Pick it up," said Pallisseaux, resting his hand with the dice box heavily on the board. The men, among whose legs the dice had fallen, bent down to search.

"This comes of too much brandy," remarked the boy, sweetly. "Now my hand is as steady as a soldier's should be." But he instantly put it under the plank as La Bourdonnaye looked at him.

"There! Catch hold!" called out one of the men, and flung the dice at Pallisseaux who caught it flying.

He tossed and threw six again. "What luck," murmured La Bourdonnaye. "Look sharp, Mignon!"

The boy stretched out his right hand. The note still lay crushed in his left. He felt as if it burnt like fire into his flesh; every word a flame. Pallisseaux gave him the box and he threw.

"Mon Dieu! three," exclaimed Chastaniè.

All eyes watched Pallisseaux throw. It was one.

"Now, Mnizek, be smart. Call on the Fates," cried Chastaniè.

"Do you want me to win?" said the boy, his eyes very bright and excited.

"Yes, half a dozen pockets do," laughed Chastaniè. "Go on."

"There is some one coming to the door," observed La Bourdonnaye, turning his face for a moment towards the curtain. "A call to headquarters, I expect. Quick, Mnizek, let us see this thing out."

The boy tossed, gave one swift glance at the dice, and sprang to his feet.

"Lost!" broke in a shout from the men. "The kiss, Mignon, the kiss! Stand up, Pallisseaux. Come on, little one, pay!"

Pallisseaux shot a look keen but triumphant at his comrades. His scar was blood red, but his manner showed his usual hard, self-controlled air. The rug was raised in the midst of the uproar and an orderly looked in.

"What is it? What the devil is it?" exclaimed La Bourdonnaye, excitedly.

"Wanted at headquarters, sir, Captain Pallisseaux," answered the man.

Pallisseaux rose to his feet. "Coming!" he called out, waving his hand to the orderly; and he turned to the boy.

"Mignon, pretty Mignon," he said, in his clear measured tone, "pay!"

A daring look came into the boy's eyes; his gaze darted hither and thither round the hut. Then he caught up Pallisseaux's cloak, swung it about the aide-de-camp's head, and with a peal of musical laughter, rushed out of the place. A smothered oath, and the men's shouts and laughter followed him as he ran across the street of the camp.

"Now," thought the boy, "this is awful. I must meet him. Good God!"

He set off down the slope to the pond. The moon had broken out from the clouds and shone on the men gathered round the fires. Voices

floated towards him on the still, frosty air, and the fragment of a song.

At the foot of the slope a sentinel challenged him. He gave the word and hurried by. Then he halted and looked across the field, and up at the sky, and clenched his hands. His progress was made by fits and starts; sometimes he went rapidly, but oftener paused; all the time his heart beat as the hare's who knows its pursuers are near. The pond widened out before him, scarcely distinguishable from the field save for the black hole broken through the ice for the horses. His feet sank through the crust of snow as he crossed it steadily, forcing himself on while invisible bands would have dragged him back. Then up the bank he climbed, and paused among the trees.

Pahlen let go his scabbard and stretched out his hand. The girl whom he was risking his life to save stood a few paces from him. The moonlight touched her face and the folds of her military cloak.

She drew back ; and her movement shook the snow from a branch, which fell whitening her cap and shoulders.

"For God's sake, go away!" she said, a tremor in her voice. "You are in the French camp."

"I only know that you are in it," he answered, in a tone that suddenly thrilled her. "I have come to save you."

"Go, go!" she repeated, her face whitened and scared. "The picket will hear you!"

"Not till I bring you with me! Not till I have saved you!"

"From what? Do you not know" —and her voice shook—"do you not know that by daring to send that note you might have betrayed me! Yes! the men thought—— I had to tell them. By what right"—suddenly stopping and stamping her foot—"by what right are you here?"

"By a man right. By the right of our ride across the snow. By the right—yes, by the right of our marriage."

"Ah! you dare allude to that!"

Her voice quivered with mingled fear and indignation. "Go, sir! That insult has not been forgiven yet."

"This is my atonement!" exclaimed Pahlen. "I have come here partly because of that act—partly—good God! do you know what they call you in the camp?"

"A boy—a pretty boy—Mignon," she said, half defiantly. "I can play my part. Yes!"

"They call you a *gay little devil!*—you—you, a girl, whose name should be sacred to these men. What midsummer madness has seized you that this should have happened!"

She had backed in among the tangled brushwood till the whitened branches looked like a web around her. The moonlight shone down through the trees on her face. A fairy tale of his childhood flashed through his mind as he caught the starry gleam of her eyes through the network of twigs. She was the imprisoned princess, cursed, under an evil spell.

"Oh, a high madness!" she said,

with a ring of pathos and pride. "I wear this sword because I am a daughter of Poland, and her sons are cowards, or asleep."

He stretched out his hand impulsively.

"Come with me. Be a woman again," he said, his voice softened and pleading.

"No, no!" and she quivered. "The Red Star — my destiny—has called me."

"And I — life, love, hope, your womanhood, would drag you back from that despair. Listen to my entreaty. Leave this cursed camp to-night."

Her eyes flashed upon him. "Life, love, hope! What have I to do with them? I gave them the night you mocked me to my country. They are hers."

"Come — come with me," he pleaded, his tone full of fear and appeal. "For God's sake, come. We will talk about this afterwards. Now is your only chance of escape."

The darkness crept down again as

he spoke ; till only the shape of her head and her half-hidden form could be distinguished in the night. Her voice rang out without a quaver.

" Escape ! With you !—a foe twice over. These men are my friends—the saviours of Poland, while you, you——" she broke off.

Despair seized him. To-morrow —a few hours later—the recall might come, and the cavalry retire from Königsberg. At the headquarters of the French army it would be impossible to reach her.

" Little Countess "—his tone was agitated —- " forget me, forget our previous connection. Take me as an instrument that can help you to escape. You are a girl ; you don't see it ; you don't understand. But it is true you daily risk your life ; you are killing—yes, you must be killing your modesty. You are imperilling your whole womanhood."

There was a moment's pause, then she broke into a laugh. For a second the repulsion he had once or twice felt for her before, even while she

attracted him, seized Pahlen. This was why she had been called the *gay little devil.* She had no shame, no heart; her soul had left her, and she was unsexed.

"How can you laugh?" he said, sternly. "It is true."

He heard the brushwood rustle as she moved.

"From a man's view," she answered, and her voice suddenly sank.

A sigh followed, and the sound thrilled him. In a moment he felt a wild desire to take her up in his arms and carry her away from the terrors of the camp.

"Countess — Halka, come with me," he said.

In the brief pause that ensued he could see her head droop. Then her voice reached his ears again clear and distinct.

"I will not leave the French," she said with earnestness.

"My God!" he exclaimed aloud to himself, "how shall I open her eyes?"

She moved away.

"No, no!" he said, passionately. "Don't leave me! Not yet—not yet, till I have warned you of the risks you run."

He broke through the underwood and stood by her side. His eyes sought hers in the dark.

"Listen to me, I implore you," he said, bending forward to read her face. "Listen to what I have to tell you."

Her head was turned aside, but she had paused. She felt dismayed and angry that he should have power over her, that she should be affected by his voice, by his presence. Indignantly she declared to herself that it was not true, but her heart told her that it was, and cried out that the knowledge was pain.

"I insulted you that night," he went on. "Forgive me. Your scorn hurt me then, but I deserved it. I rode away and said I would forget you. But the bond between us held me. Then you rode into my life—into my heart—in that uniform. I recognised you as you awoke, when

your girl's eyes looked into mine. In Murat's camp I wished you dead. That was the devil in me, the coward you had known—not the real man. I saw your little body shot and mangled, left on the snow for wolves. If there is hell, I saw it then, and I vowed to save you. Yes, I vowed that only death should prevent me. Your danger never left my heart; and Eylau came, and I rode and charged and suffered and went through hell with you there."

Her head hung lower still; the feeling that she was a girl, not a soldier, arose and deepened. The veiled drooping figure of her country paled away before a new and not yet understood emotion.

"Then I followed you here." His voice still rang with feeling, but there was resolution now in his tone. "I followed you to keep my vow, and I shall keep it. Little girl, you do not know your danger yet. You are in peril from us. It must soon be known in our lines that a Count Mnizek is on Murat's staff. That will mean your

certain discovery, your capture in time, your exile for life. And now that the armies are lying inactive, these men will have time to find you out." He paused, and his tone suddenly hardened. "It is astonishing that they have not done so already. What can they think of you? Pet you as a pretty boy? Good God! how can you stand that? They are smitten with blindness and imbecility. How long do you think you can deceive them or act the part?"

He broke off; his vehemence filled the girl with fear lest he should be heard, and her heart beat fast from varied emotions.

"Fly now," he continued, hurriedly, his voice once more beseeching and tender. "This is the moment for escape. To-morrow Murat, the staff, some one among the squadrons may find you out. The moon is still hidden. Not a sentinel can see us as we cross the field. The Jews will give you clothes. Come! I implore you, come!"

She shrank back, hiding her face in

her hands. The fire, the tenderness in his tone thrilled and frightened her. For a second she saw the lost possibilities of her life, the gifts that should have been hers which had crumbled instead to dust.

"You hurt me. Go!" she almost moaned. "You are twice my foe—my country's foe, my heart's foe. I am not dead. I am a woman still. God called me. My star steeled my heart. I shall follow my fate."

"Not while I have a voice and sword to hinder it. I will break your fate," said Pahlen. "Sweet, come with me. I have the right. I shall protect you."

In an instant she dropped her hands and held them out as if to drive off some invisible foe.

"No right! No right!" she said with a sob. "Only the right of an insult!"

The blood rushed to his face. He could have caught her in his arms and held her fast from the men, her comrades, the Frenchmen in the camp.

"You shall not escape," he said with passion. "You shall not go back to the staff. I have paid for the insult now. I have taken my life in my hand. I give it to you. It is yours, and, since it is yours, you shall come with me."

She fought again with the new bright foe that had sprung up before her, that had sprung out of her heart, and the fatalism of her race helped her to conquer. No will, not even her own, could alter her destiny, she believed. Her voice was clear and controlled as she answered him.

"I will not leave the camp. Let me be killed! When my work is done God will take me. You, Count, are daring to use the world's belief; I am not. I never shall be your wife!"

Her tone silenced him for a moment, but her peril and the passion in his own heart stirred him to again plead with her.

"If I use the world's belief it is because the horror of your position fills me with mortal fear for you,"

he said with strong emotion. "You are my wife in the sight of all men. To-night I shall, I dare to claim the right of protecting, of saving you."

"To your own ruin?" she said, with something like wistful wonder.

"The world will ask for me some day. Here I am dead to you. Another Eylau——" she broke off suddenly. "Oh, God! how wonderful that was! Oh, God! the dead!"

She shuddered and burst into sobs; he laid his hand upon hers, but she shook it off and recovered herself.

"The darkness lasts," he said, imploringly. "Come."

"No! No!" she answered with sudden emphasis, and her hand fell on the hilt of her sword. In an instant the girl became transformed. It was as if the accursed war-spirit, the zeitgeist of those years, had sprung into her heart and trampled down the woman there. All the hopes she had hoped, all the dreams she had dreamed for her country

leapt up before her now. She was again heroic and ready to die.

"Come!" he pleaded once more, his hand feeling for hers.

"Never," she said, her voice thrilling and low. "Never. I trust in God. Good-bye!"

She turned before he could guess her resolve, and fled, breaking her way through the thicket till she gained the pond. "I am safe, safe, now," she whispered to herself as she ran along the ice. "Never, never again shall he make me feel a girl!"

But he had followed her, unable to accept the fact that she was running back to her own destruction.

"Halka! Halka!" he cried in despair; but no voice answered him.

She had got beyond his power; not even the dread of detection could make her alter her purpose. She was flying to the camp as to a harbour of refuge.

"Gone, gone; she is lost!" he said to himself bitterly, and, standing still, gazed blankly through the trees. To him she seemed like one

under the curse of the gods, driven along the path of doom.

After many minutes had passed he took his scabbard in his hand, and went towards the edge of the wood. A jingle of bridle reins and accoutrements rang out from the left. He heard the vedette's challenge and the reply; then a white gleam of moonlight cut across the darkness.

His failure held his thoughts; the girl's peril filled him with despair. He stepped forward, indifferent to the fact that his shadow fell like a blot of ink on the moonlight ground. He went slowly across the field, till a voice from the rear ordered him to halt, and dispelled the mental inertness that had fallen over him. In an instant life and liberty became sweet; he stopped, looked back, and waved his hand, calling out the name of a dragoon regiment and the number of a squadron.

There was a hedge at the end of the field, and beyond that the road and a thicket. His escape depended, he knew, upon the clouds hiding the

moon, which shone with penetrating brilliancy. He dared not walk fast, conscious that the patrol watched him. The voice rang out imperiously again, and now his pace increased. The next instant a bullet whistled over his head. He drew his sword, ran forward and up the bank as a second shot flew by his cheek. In another moment the patrol galloped up, and he was surrounded.

VII.

EARLY on the following morning a group of officers cantered through the camp, and drew up at a point where the ground rose into a slight eminence. A feeble sun cast a white light on the fortifications of the town. There the gunners watched with interest the movements of the French. In the lines of the latter all the pickets had been called in, and the men of the advance guard were already in their saddles. The pretence of besieging Königsberg was at an end. An Imperial order had come, commanding Murat to retire with the cavalry to Osterode.

The Prince sat a few paces in front of his personal staff, talking to two general officers, as he looked at the fortification through a field-glass. He rode a dark bay, with splendid housings ; a scarlet cloak, that hung

over his shoulders, only half hid his extravagantly-trimmed tunic, which was rich with gold and expensive fur. Various coloured feathers also trembled in his hat. His dark eyes were keen and bold, yet jovial too ; and the man bore himself with the assured air that twelve years of success and the prospect of a kingdom had given him.

The officers of his personal staff talked in lower tones behind him. Their eyes, too, rested on Königsberg with the exception of Pallisseaux's, which were turned every now and then upon the camp.

"The little rascal is taking his time," he observed, tightening his reins as his horse became restive. "He shall pay though."

"What a young devil! What adroitness," returned La Bourdonnaye. "I knew he 'd wriggle out of it like an eel. What the devil can be his reason, though? He 's smart and amusing, but there 's something odd about the boy."

"We have spoilt him," remarked

the senior officer of the staff. "At least, you and Chastaniè have. Send him back to Poniatowski's Lancers. Discipline 's slack there."

"It is hard, I know, deuced hard, for you, Pallisseaux," said Chastaniè, smiling under his yellow moustache. "But what would you have? The money was fairly won. You failed to make the boy kiss any one."

"Very good," said Pallisseaux, coldly, his keen eyes turned again on the camp. "The money is yours. I have paid you all. But I mean, when we have leisure, to teach young Mnizek the first principles of honour. He shall have a lesson. By heavens! he shall." His clear voice never altered its even modulation, but there was a nasty look in his eyes as he paused.

"I shall be present at the lesson," said La Bourdonnaye. "Mignon has amused me, and his tricks are pretty. He 'll make a man yet, never fear. The boy has nerve, and is ready for work."

"It was cleverly done," grinned

another of the staff. "Smart boy; he ought to be a Frenchman. He swung that cloak round your head in a trice. You were drunk, too, Pallisseaux, that gave him a chance. But we'll make him pay when we get to Osterode."

Pallisseaux raised one hand to his much-pointed moustache

"Yes, it was very clever, very smart," he said. "But the young devil shall learn another trick."

As he spoke his eyes went once more towards the camp. Coming from it, right across the field, marched a small party of soldiers. They were leading a prisoner straight towards the hillock. Pallisseaux's eyes swept them for a moment with a cold, indifferent glance.

"The spy," remarked Chastaniè, looking in the same direction. "The man was caught within the lines last night."

"The Prince wishes to question him," said La Bourdonnaye. "A Russian Jew, I believe."

No one was interested in the spy.

Most of the staff looked at their chief, and commented on the Imperial order. Meanwhile the guards and their prisoner drew near.

Pahlen's hands were tied, and he walked between two soldiers. The colourless, bleak day, and the sight of the knot of men drawn up on the hillock, filled him with a curious feeling, as if he were being brought to see something that was quite apart from his own life, and in which he was in no way concerned.

He had passed a bitter night. The conviction that he had staked and lost his life for a girl who had deliberately chosen her own ruin was a hard reflection. What he had once dreaded so keenly had happened; she had ruined him, though that ruin had come in a different form from what he had pictured it would be, and in a more terrible measure. To die as a spy was a cruel end; and it was her perversity that had brought about his fate. All night he had sat thinking over his own folly and hers.

As he drew near the Prince his

mood changed. The inability to grasp the terrible certainty of his position which had given him that curious feeling of distance from his surroundings passed, and he felt all his faculties suddenly sharpened. He became keenly alert, and conscious that he was drawing near the most supreme moment in his life.

He began to think of death, and tried to realise that he and time and all that time held were about to part. But he felt with horror that he could not, that eternity had no meaning for the quick, breathing body when every rivet of life was still strong. His eyes wandered from the group of officers to the fields and the road and the huts standing against the background of the birch-wood, and then out and on to the pale blue of the horizon. Every nerve was strung to its fullest tension, and he felt himself most horribly alive ; and yet he knew that in an hour's time he should most certainly be dead. He wondered if what he was suffering was sheer physical fear ; whether he was a

coward ; whether his courage, which had borne him often into danger and made him risk his life again and again, had left him now. Then he thought that it was vitality in his body, the life that ran so strong and young within him that made him dread death. What would the shock be like when it was suddenly wrenched from its hold? Sick men slipped down into the Dark with each bond that held them weakened and loosened ; but here would be a thrill, a horror, an unutterable moment. It was the change in an instant from what was known to the unknown that made the flesh which did not wish to die shiver and recoil.

And yet he had renounced, and renounced without a moment's hesitation, his one chance of keeping the life in his body. If he were to declare that he had entered the camp to claim his wife, and were to tell Murat Halka's sex, there was a possibility that he might be believed, and not shot. But the power that had forced him to protect the girl, almost against

his will, made him now know that he must still shelter her, even at the cost of his life. And the irony of it all was that though he had run into peril to entreat her to leave the camp, he dared not for his honour's sake betray her to Murat, though that betrayal would bring about what he desired.

His manner was outwardly cool, and nothing in his face showed the thoughts that rent his soul, as his eyes again searched the men around and behind the Prince, their uniforms trimmed with expensive furs and astrachan, glittered with massy knots of gold and decorations. The personal staff looked to him the reckless, dice-tossing men that they were. As he glanced from face to face there rose up in his heart a feeling of blank amazement that Halka had spent three weeks in their society and had not been discovered. The Jew's words flashed across him, and his thoughts hardened as he recalled them. He felt for the moment as if the shame she should have known had seized him.

The emotion, however, was so transient that it appeared immediately afterwards to him an absolutely stupid and unnecessary feeling. His thoughts seemed to cross and recross ;. one contradicting the other, and all in apparent confusion ; yet they were strangely clear to his soul as if it were looking on at a scene apart from itself. He felt as if he had two individualities, and that one, with an even, balanced judgment, was weighing the other. "Yes," he said to himself, "I am jealous of and angry with these men and with her ; but what folly it all is, for here is death."

His gaze finally rested on Murat. He was conscious of feeling interested, yet half amused, as he looked at the bedizened figure of the great cavalryman. Then all other thoughts passed as he remembered that the Prince held his life in his hand.

His presence was announced by the officer in command of the guard. Murat, however, took no notice ; he was speaking in a loud, rather jovial, tone to his two companions.

"Yes, by God! I could have done it," he said—"done it at the sword's point. I took Prenzlow at the gallop, and Lasalle rode into Sletton. What? You think it impossible?"

"I fear so, your highness. The Prussians opened their gates. The Russians know how to use their guns," answered one of the generals.

Murat's eyes fell on Pahlen. "Ah! the spy," he exclaimed, and his tone and manner changed. "Bring him forward. What does he say he is? An officer in the Emperor of Russia's horse guards?"

"So he states, your highness," replied the officer.

"And in the disguise of one of my dragoons. Well, you sir, what is your name? What made you dare to enter my lines?"

"I ought to speak now," thought Pahlen, "but what can I say?" His eyes met steadily the bold dark ones fixed on him.

"What number of men and guns have you got in Königsberg?" demanded the Prince, abruptly.

"I do not know. I have not been in the town," replied Pahlen, and was surprised to find his own voice so cool.

"It will be safer for you to answer my questions, sir. Has Benningsen retired beyond the Pregel?"

Pahlen scarcely heard the question; his eyes had wandered to the Prince's staff. Where was Halka? Why had the men not found her out? What idiots they were! A fool might know no boy spoke and looked like that. Mingled with these thoughts was a feverish wish to get the whole thing over; this interval was torture to his soul. Suddenly he remembered the question; that it had been asked by the man who had power to kill or save him.

"I was wounded on the Lower Vistula," he replied slowly, almost mechanically. "A peasant sheltered me in his cottage. I assumed this disguise in order to avoid capture when following our army."

The Prince scarcely attended to his words. He was impatient to

learn what news he could of the Russians, and he interrupted him.

"Give me the exact number of your men," he said sternly. And the losses to your battalions at Eylau. Also information as to what army you have got beyond the Pregel."

These questions seemed a superfluous insult to Pahlen. The desire to end the scene rushed over him again. He remained silent.

Murat repeated his inquiries, and in a still sterner tone. His eyes rested on Pahlen with an expression that showed his mind was fixed upon the details of his questions ; that he had no other interest in his prisoner ; no human feeling that the latter's life was at his disposal.

"If you give me correct replies you shall not be shot," he said. But his tone showed absolute indifference to Pahlen's fate.

It flashed upon Pahlen that some in his place would fling back the gift of life in the giver's teeth when it was shackled with such conditions. But how could a man attitudinise,

act bad tragedy in the face of death?

"Answer the Prince, sir!" remarked one of the generals, sternly.

The words set the smouldering fire in his heart into a blaze. He looked up; his eyes glittered with a cold, hard light; rage and scorn rang in his answer.

"Prince Murat, I am neither spy nor traitor," he replied, holding himself erect.

"Think again, sir, or you will be shot," returned the General, in a threatening tone.

"Do you refuse the offer?" asked Murat.

There was no reply.

"Attend to me!" exclaimed the Prince, running Pahlen all over with his eyes. "You are a spy, a deserter, and a man with a price. I am willing to buy your information. If you care for your life give me correct and instant answers."

"You mistake me for some one else," answered Pahlen, passion and shame in his face. "I am a Russian

noble, a captain in the Tzar's horse guards."

Murat shrugged his shoulders; his eyes were pitilesss.

"Once more I give you the chance," he said, grimly. "Do you refuse?"

Pahlen's gaze had never left the face of the great, bedizened soldier, the representative of swift and stern military law, his eyes gleamed and narrowed, then a single word burst from his lips.

"Yes!" he said, as if he had torn it from his throat.

Murat made a slight movement. "Take the prisoner away," he remarked, in a cool, business-like tone. As the guards closed round Pahlen he turned to one of his companions and commented on a point in the defences of the town. This indifference filled Pahlen with a chill; and yet he knew that his case was only an incident of war; and that no one ever pitied a spy; that Murat's callousness was but that of a man who had faced and defied death in a dozen bloody wars.

Each step now took him nearer to the end. The foolish farce, the moments wasted in inquiry were over. Death beckoned, waited for him in the men's barrels. And again the feeling of vitality dismayed him. He saw and heard all the things of life about him—the white fields, the walls of the town behind which his friends lay, the living men and all the stirring noises and sounds of voices in the camp—with a keenness of vision and hearing such as he had never known before. His senses refused to accept the fact that all those accented notes of life and scenes were to disappear in a few minutes, that his own existence was to be cut off.

The guards had lead him half way down the hillock when a bright-faced, smiling boy galloped past and saluted Murat. Pahlen started—and his eyes contracted. Half involuntarily he drew up as he saw the smile freeze on the boy's lips and a look of horror leap to his eyes. The guards pushed him forward, but he heard the gasp and saw the convulsive grasp of the

hand on the rein, and a dark red colour rushed over his own face.

The boy sat frozen in his saddle, his eyes wide open, fixed beyond Murat and the staff, who looked at him with gathering surprise. All his soul was in a tumult. A spy! And he had not even heard that one had been taken. Why had this awful thing happened? The Prince, Pallisseaux, the hawk-eyed men had their eyes upon him. Of what were they thinking! Had they any suspicion? They were whispering. Yes! there behind the Prince, Chastaniè's keen eyes were upon him as he bent towards Pallisseaux. And the others! The major whose smile had always seemed to have a hidden meaning—La Bourdonnaye, who had looked at his hands last night. Each one—all these men whom every hour he had secretly feared. Was it here in the full blaze of day that they were to know? No! he would die first.

Then it flashed upon him that there was no time for hesitation or daintiness in the crisis. His decision must

be made that instant if he was to keep the soul in Pahlen's body. It was death either way ; his spiritually or Pahlen's life, and he must choose between the two at once.

Murat's voice reached his ears as from a distance. He started and stared at the Prince ; on every side it seemed to him that he was raked by eyes. Mechanically he spoke.

"Your highness"—his voice was hollow and broken—"your highness, the advance guard——May I inform you, sir, that the prisoner about to be shot is an officer in the Emperor of Russia's horse guards."

"His report was true, then," said Murat with indifference.

"Well, Mnizek, why does General D'Hautville not march ?"

"He is about to, sir," the boy's voice again broke off, then a keen note of entreaty rushed into his tone. "Your highness, he is Count Pahlen, not a spy. I implore you save his life."

The Prince looked surprised ; he searched the boy's face for a moment before he replied.

"Finish your report," he said shortly.

"It is true," was the answer; the boy's eyes glittered, his breath came short and hard. His comrades stirred in their saddles. Both La Bourdonnaye and Chastaniè tried to hide the smile that crept under their moustaches. Pallisseaux fixed him with a bold, searching gaze; the rest of the aides-de-camps watched with half-surprised, half-amused glances to see what mad trick the boy they had petted and spoilt was about to do.

"Your report?" repeated the Prince.

"General D'Hautville is about to march with the advance guard." The words were broken and hurried, the boy stopped short. Then, as if he had forgotten the rest of his report, he suddenly cried out in a tone of acute pain and terror, "Prince Murat, I would not lie to you. The prisoner is not a spy. He is not. I know it. He is an honourable officer. I have met him in Russia.

I ask you—I implore you spare his life."

His manner and agitated face arrested Murat's attention. He looked at the boy sternly for a moment. Yet wild and reckless as his tricks had been with the staff, he knew he would not dare to play them off on him. A glance showed him also that his suspicion that the boy was drunk was incorrect.

"He is a spy," he replied. "Nothing can be clearer than his quiet. He was found in the camp in a French uniform and must be shot."

The boy cast a terrified glance over his shoulder. Then his eyes felt scathed by lightning, and he sprang off his horse.

"Good God, sir, you are about to kill an innocent man," he exclaimed. A frown gathered on Murat's brow, and a jingle of steel rang through the group of men behind him.

"He had better look out," whispered La Bourdonnaye to the man nearest to him. "Young fool! he is going too far."

"Ten thousand francs that he has the audacity to play it out. I 'll back little Mignon. Mon Dieu, yes," was the reply.

"Re-mount, sir!" said Murat, angrily. "What does this mean?"

"A life! an innocent life!" cried the boy. "How shall I make you believe me. Great God! It will be murder if he is shot! I shall have done it. I shall have murdered him. How can I save him—your highness—I implore you——"

His voice sank, he clasped his hands together in anguish.

"The man is a spy without doubt," Murat remarked, turning to the two generals. "But unless Count Mnizek is mad, he must have some strong reason for his singular behaviour. I shall inquire into this."

"I strongly recommend your highness to do so," replied one of the officers, significantly. "I have never seen any reason why we should trust these Poles."

Murat called for the officer first on duty, and La Bourdonnaye rode

forward. As he galloped down the hillock to delay the execution the boy grew white as death. The blood throbbed wildly in his veins; he heard, as from a distance, the Prince demand an explanation of his conduct.

But he could not reply. No coherent sentence would come to his lips. His terrified senses alone grasped the fact that Pahlen had been respited for a minute, and that he had to save him. To his eyes the scene appeared to be made up of snow, a pale blue sky, a confused glitter of uniforms, with one scarlet blot, the Prince's cloak, the centre of it all.

"Are you drunk, aide-de-camp? Why do you not answer his highness?" said one of the generals, harshly.

Still his lips refused to speak. The men's glances pierced him like points of steel. A wild desire to turn and run away from them filled his soul. But the knowledge pressing into his heart—eating into his

life—that he alone kept back the balls from riddling Pahlen's body, held him frozen to the spot.

"Explain this matter at once, sir!" exclaimed Murat. "Give me your reason for saying the prisoner is not a spy."

His tone and manner compelled an answer.

"Your highness," and the words seemed forced on his lips, "he is not—he is Count Pahlen of the Russian guards."

Murat's reply was short and sharp.

"A friend of yours?"

"No friend of mine." The answer came as if torn from the boy.

"If not a spy, what brought him to the camp?"

"To—see me." The young aide-de-camp's head dropped, his tone was despairing.

"*You!*"

"Yes, highness."

"Pray why?"

"Because—because—to speak to me."

"No lies, sir, or I shall put you

under arrest. What did he say to you?"

"He asked me to leave your service."

"Why?"

"He thought I was—I was too young to be a soldier. He said the Russians would capture me."

An incredulous look shone in every man's eyes; Murat's face grew dark, and so did both the generals. Every man present believed the boy had lied. Chastanièe and three or four others were conscious of a disappointment. They had rated the lad's power of lying at a higher point than he now showed himself capable of reaching; and the lack of all his usual audacity, his utter breakdown, gave them a sense of having been defrauded.

"Count Mnizek, do you expect me to believe this statement?" said the Prince, with rising temper. "Either you are drunk, sir, or daring to impose upon me. Have you no other explanation to offer?"

The boy's hands tightened to-

gether. "Your highness, if you will only believe me! It is true! True as life or death! He came to warn me."

To the men who looked at him he seemed a mere hysterical, sobbing boy. A wave of disgust spread through the group. He had fallen in an hour from a bright, audacious lad, to a nerveless emotional creature. No one, not even La Bourdonnaye, who had returned, felt any sympathy for him.

"I ask you again," said Murat, sternly; "have you anything further to say?"

"Yes, yes, to beg—to implore you to save Count Pahlen's life!"

"Give up your sword, sir. I put you under arrest. As to the Russian he shall be shot. You have held communication with a spy, and shall be tried by court-martial at Osterode."

Murat's quick temper was fully roused; his face was red and angry as he spoke. The boy's eyes widened, and his voice had the treble ring of

a woman whose soul is in anguish as he cried out.

"Take my life if you like! But you shall not—you dare not—Oh, God! you shall not kill Basil Vassilievitch! Not now! Not now!"

"Take his sword," said Murat, in a loud, angry voice.

The boy's hands rushed to his face for a moment. "Good God!" he thought, "will nothing but that make them believe me. Nothing but that!" Then they fell away from his pallid face, and he looked up. But not till he saw the aide-de-camp about to start to give the order for Pahlen to be shot was he able to speak the words that were like a sentence of death to himself. His body thrilled as if in mortal agony.

"Your highness," he gasped. "What I said was true—before God and all the Saints it was true—but there was more—I will tell you—but keep La Bourdonnaye—La Bourdonnaye, wait—listen—I will tell the Prince all. Oh—God—why will you look at me! Count Pahlen came to

see me—me—me—because I am his wife——"

Her voice died away, but she saw the sudden start of the men and heard their astonished gasps. Then the next moment she experienced a feeling as if in speaking she had died and the pain was past.

For half a minute no one spoke, then Murat swore and started so violently in his saddle that he set his horse curvetting. A woman? By God! a woman! a woman on my staff!" he exclaimed.

"A woman!" echoed Pallisseaux, as he and the other aides-de-camp stared in blank amazement at her. "Great Heavens! that explains it all," he added, gasping.

No one spoke again for a moment; every man was struck dumb by the sheer marvel of the thing. Every face was turned on the girl; every eye searched her face and figure.

Her gaze rested on the sky as she stood rigid before them, unable to speak. In an instant each man knew that her words were true, that it was

a woman who had played the boy for three weeks on the staff. As conviction sprang upon them, all in a moment Chastaniè leant back and burst into a loud, long laugh. The sound broke the spell of blank astonishment; the situation in all its bearings rushed upon the men; admiration, amusement, eager interest leapt into their gaze. A dozen scabbards clinked on a dozen spurs as they bent forward in their saddles; their laughter rang across the field to where Pahlen waited, suffering mental torture as keen as death.

Murat had joined for a moment in the mirth. But his surprise had merged into something like anger. He feared the laughter of the Emperor and the army; the situation struck him as being quite as absurd as it was extraordinary. Nevertheless, the girl's courage forced his admiration.

He looked down at her from between his horse's ears, the admiration of the soldier mingling with the annoyance of the man.

"Who are you, girl? What mad-

ness made you play this trick?" he said, half roughly.

She made no reply; still standing with her white face and shamed eyes fixed on the sky—the sky that would not fall and hide her. Murat turned to his staff. His half-angry eyes ran over their faces. Every aide-de-camp put on a blank official expression.

"Your staff has been singularly blind, your highness," remarked one of the generals, with a grin. "There has been no connivance, I suppose?"

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Murat, sternly, "had any of you guessed this?"

"No, your highness," replied the senior-officer of the staff. "None of us."

"No, sir, none of us, none of us," repeated the rest of the men.

"Well," said Murat, half scornfully, "I gave you credit for keener wits and sharper eyes than you seem to possess. You will be but little use on my staff if you can be imposed upon by a girl! She might have been a spy herself, and you would not have

known it." Then he swung round in his saddle and looked again at Halka.

"Pallisseaux," he said, sharply, "bring up the Russian."

The aide-de-camp rode out of the group, and leaning slightly to one side, smiled down at the girl.

"Forgive my blindness, Mignon," he whispered, flashing his eyes upon her as he went by. Then he sped down the hillock muttering to himself, "Fools, idiots! We might have known by the kiss!"

Pahlen had guessed that Halka was pleading for him when the respite came. But he did not think that even to save his life she would reveal her sex. He knew he had no claim, no right to expect her to make such a sacrifice. He knew, too, what an agony of shame the confession would cost her. So he had stood waiting in horrible suspense while his guards laughed and talked. The thud of Pallisseaux's horse's hoofs in the snow rang in his ears as the signal that hope was over. Halka had failed, and he must now die. Then

in an instant his courage was roused, and drawing himself up he waited with a fearless air for what seemed the inevitable moment.

Pallisseaux drew rein a few yards from the party, and his hard, light blue eyes swept Pahlen and his guards.

"Bring the prisoner before the Prince!" he called out: and as the blood sprang up Pahlen's face, he turned and galloped away.

The soldiers grinned. One of them, a man who had been a priest before the Revolution, began to joke.

"Ha, ha, my brave spy," he said, rolling his bloodshot eyes, "I would have shriven you just now. Wait, wait, there 'll be time enough for the devil's mass yet."

"Hold your tongue, rascal!" roared the sergeant. And the party fell into order, and led Pahlen back to the hillock.

As he looked up the rise and saw Halka standing rigid and stony-eyed before the Prince and all the watch-

ing men, a light sprang into his own eyes.

"She has told," he instantly thought, and was conscious only of a passion of shame and pity for her.

Pallisseaux rode down the slope to meet them.

"Halt!" he ordered; "the prisoner is to advance alone."

He walked his horse up the hillock by Pahlen's side as the latter stepped forward, glancing askance at him as he twisted his moustache.

Murat wore a less stern air. As a jovial, gallant soldier the silent, stricken figure of the girl had appealed to his chivalry. His first annoyance had passed; her bravery had won his respect, and he looked keenly, but with an air now of human interest, at Pahlen.

"Well, sir, I learn your story is true," he said abruptly. "Count Pahlen, of the Tzar's horse guards, you said?"

"Yes, Prince," said Pahlen, his own danger forgotten, every thought fixed on the girl, a passion of longing

to hide her from the Prince and his staff raging in his heart.

"You see this officer here, this aide-de-camp," continued Murat, while a grin went round the men, sober generals and all. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, your highness."

"Is this girl your wife?" said Murat, suddenly. The grin widened on Pallisseaux's face, and on those of one or two others. Pahlen's eyes flashed.

"Your highness, you have learnt this lady's secret," he said, his voice like ice. "A prince of your known chivalry——" but Murat interrupted him.

"No one shall insult the girl," he exclaimed. "She has the courage and heart of a man. But, in the name of the Devil, how has this thing happened?"

"Am I to explain, sir?"

"Yes, and quickly; my squadrons are retiring."

Pahlen looked straight at the Prince, his heart beating fiercely at

the knowledge that Halka was the point for every man's eyes. His tone, however, was cool, clear, and decisive.

"This lady is my wife, the Countess Pahlen," he said, standing rigid. "Our marriage had not been of our own choosing. We parted after the ceremony. I learnt lately that she was serving on your staff, and my object in visiting your camp last night was to rescue her."

"Is it known to the Russians that she is on my staff?"

"No. God forbid!" said Pahlen.

"What fired the girl? What was her name and rank?"

"God knows what fired her. She belongs to a noble Polish family. I prefer to keep her name a secret."

"Very well, sir; but we are Frenchmen, and should not have betrayed it. Honour is as dear to us as glory. However, n'importe! As to you, sir, like other men you have risked your life for a woman's sake. We French are chivalrous and admire courage, and I grant you your liberty. Here,

Lieutenant Mnizek, my brave girl aide-de-camp, cut your husband's bonds. I give you his life."

She neither moved nor appeared to hear him, and La Bourdonnaye sprang off his horse. Unclasping his cloak, he flung it over her shoulders. His handsome dark eyes looked into hers with bold admiration.

"Take it, Mignon, my pretty comrade," he said, in a tone of mingled sentiment and kindness, and lingered by her for a moment.

"Your highness," he added, addressing Murat. "Permit me to carry out your order and cut the cords."

Murat nodded, and as La Bourdonnaye severed the rope that bound Pahlen's hands, the Prince turned to Halka.

"Brave girl. As a Frenchman I honour the noble spirit which has made you fight for your country. As a Prince, and a leader of the Emperor's vanguard," he added grandiloquently, "I protect you. Your secret is safe with Frenchmen. You may rely upon our word. Gentlemen of

my staff," the Prince looked round at his aides-de-camp, "you hear what I have said."

"Will the Countess ride as our *vivandière*, your highness?" asked Pallisseaux. "She would find us good comrades still."

"If she will honour us so far," said Chastaniè. "Your highness may depend upon our never being deceived into thinking her a boy again."

"Yes, yes, your highness," chorused several of the men.

Murat laughed loudly, but paused as his eyes fell on Pahlen's darkened face.

"No, no. Silence, gentlemen!" he cried. "We feel nothing but admiration and respect for this heroic girl. I would to Heaven her countrymen had her courage." He paused and suddenly unpinned the Cross of the Legion of Honour that hung on his breast. Leaning down he gave it to La Bourdonnaye, who, with smiling eyes, stepped up to Halka.

"There, my child," said Murat,

"wear that, our noblest decoration. You have played well the soldier and the heroine. Turn your thoughts now to love. War is not a woman's work, and you cannot ride with us."

La Bourdonnaye laid his hand on her jacket. The rest of the staff watched him with applauding eyes; and laying the cross on her breast he pinned it to the cloth with a gay, adoring glance.

"Think of me sometimes, Mignon," he murmured. "We shall meet again."

"Mignon! Mignon!" cried Pallisseaux and Chastaniè and three or four of the others, and the whole staff stood up in their stirrups and cheered her. Men bent from their saddles with outstretched hands; eyes smiled down at her; voices that had teased and chaffed her took an added note of tenderness and homage; every man had words of farewell to say to his girl comrade, who would be of their mess no more.

"Your highness," exclaimed Pallisseaux, alighting from his horse, his face slightly flushed, and his scar a

dark line across his cheek. "Your highness, Lieutenant Mnizek owes me a debt of honour. He failed to pay last night. May I claim it now?"

A murmur of applause and laughter ran through the staff. But La Bourdonnaye cried out, "Pallisseaux was not himself, your highness. He forgets. The girl paid."

"It is not true, sir," said Pallisseaux. "She did not pay."

"What was the sum?" said Murat, shortly.

"It can be shown, not spoken, sir," replied Pallisseaux, somewhat boldly, and he stepped towards Halka. The girl drew back, the colour rushed all over her face; her eyes shone like a deer's at bay.

Pahlen made a step forward; his own eyes blazed.

"Prince—Prince Murat," she said, unutterable shame and misery in her voice—"Prince Murat—that man shall not dare—Oh—you can never know what made me be a soldier—God and my country—This has been death to me—Oh——"

With one swift salute to Murat she turned and fled down the hillock. A ringing cheer broke from the men, but Pallisseaux pointed his moustache, smiled defiantly at Pahlen, and then leisurely remounted his horse.

"Follow her, Count," said Murat. "By heaven, she is a brave girl. No challenge, sir," he added sternly as he saw Pahlen's eyes fixed on Pallisseaux. "If you think your honour is insulted, take your revenge when I hurl my squadrons on your men. Captain La Bourdonnaye shall accompany you beyond my lines."

"We shall meet again," said Pahlen, fixing his eyes on Pallisseaux, who sneered as he bowed, and then saluting the Prince, Pahlen turned away. He walked down the slope, La Bourdonnaye keeping pace by his side. The guards fell back, and the ex-priest grinned as he thought of the cheated ball in his carbine.

When half way across the field the Frenchman drew rein. "Au revoir, Count," he said, gaily.

Pahlen looked up at him. "Aide-

de-camp," he said, and his words came slowly from his lips. "Accept my thanks."

"Ah, mon Dieu! nothing. She looked so pretty and shamed. Till our next meeting, then," and La Bourdonnaye raised his cap and galloped away.

"Now gentlemen," said Murat, authoritatively, "attend to my words. This affair of the girl must be kept a secret. We shall be laughed at from here to Spain if the story gets to the ears of the Emperor and the army. Every officer present must promise silence."

This was at once done, and the party rode back to the troops, soon to forget in the hurry of war the incident that a woman had soldiered with them. *

As Halka ran down the slope and

* The promise was so well kept that the story has escaped the investigation of M. Thiers, and is not mentioned in the Baron de Marbot's Memoirs, though as that officer was afterwards on Murat's staff in Spain he may have heard it.

across the field, she flung her sword aside and put her fingers in her ears to shut out the men's cheers. Her one devouring wish was to be rid of her uniform and be a woman again. She felt crushed, overwhelmed, cast down to the earth. Her mind was still in tumult; she had no plan nor hope for the future. Her feet carried her almost by instinct over the snow, through fields, across roads, straight to the huts.

An old man stood at the door of the first as she came up, with one hand pressed to her breast, her breath coming in sobs.

"Let me speak to your wife or daughter!"

The Jew stared at her, bowed low, and beckoned to a woman within the hovel.

"Your nobility is no doubt in a hurry," said the Jewess, "as Prince Murat is retiring."

"Yes! yes!" said Halka, like one pursued. "I must take off this uniform—A woman's dress!"

"Ah, a disguise, excellency."

"No—Oh, quick, quick. Take me somewhere where I can change my dress."

"It is a woman!" thought the Jewess, swiftly. "Some intrigue with the French!"

"Follow me," she said out loud, and went into the hut, slamming the door in the old Jew's face as soon as the girl had come in.

A few minutes later Pahlen arrived on the scene. He looked at the closed door and hastened to his own hut. His guide had gone into Königsberg; and changing his uniform he returned to the open air.

Drawing near the first hovel, he paused by a paling that enclosed a small garden. The snow lay heavily on the stunted bushes and the shrunken cabbage stalks. He leant his arm on the rail and waited with eyes like those of a man who had shed tears.

When she came out of the hut he started, though he had expected the change. A look of mingled pain and tenderness shot across his face as he

watched her cross the road, and passing behind the huts, lean against the silvered stem of a birch.

He went towards her, but when she saw him coming she stretched out both her hands as if to keep him off.

"Do not come here!" she cried in a riven tone. "I thought I should have died for my country. I have died instead of shame for you!"

For answer he knelt for a moment at her feet and kissed the coarse hem of her peasant skirt.

"My life is yours," was all he could say.

She burst into tears, and he dared not try to check her grief. He turned his face away and looked towards the horizon. The French were riding across the plain; their squadrons trotting in the bright flashing lines in a westerly direction. On the further bank of the Pregel, their movements were being watched by a body of Cossacks.

He had no words with which to thank her for having snatched him

back from death. He shrank from the sight of her suffering as one shrinks from the torture of a child.

Presently he bent over her; her face was hidden in her hands, her whole frame shook with sobs.

"My little soul," he said, "how shall I comfort you?" The deep tenderness of his tone reached her ear, but for the moment grief and shame were stronger than love.

"Comfort! No one can give me that! Not even God," she sobbed. "I am undone and miserable."

"Dearest," he said, but he did not touch her. "I love you."

"Oh—what have I to do with love! I gave my heart to Poland—and this is the end."

"Give it to me," he said, with a tenderness and fire that compelled her attention. "You lie in my heart. Held there, put there for time and eternity. Dear, you should have let me die. I was not worth this sacrifice. Death after all would have been but a little pain."

A shudder crept over her. His

peril, the waiting barrels, the terrible scene rose before her again. The acutely personal aspect of her grief lessened. Love held up the scales; placed her shame against his life, and in an instant all her soul was flooded with the knowledge that his death would have been her despair. Still she sobbed and refused to look up, refused—because she dared not—to listen to his words.

And he, too, saw straight into the bitterness of the moment. It had leapt upon him as she pleaded for his life, that the soldier-girl was the woman that time, that eternity had planned for him. That there before Murat stood the one being for whom he would scale the stars, stoop down to hell, face sin and death. And yet the barrier of another life must keep them apart. He turned his face away again, a hard look creeping in his eyes.

"I did it," she sobbed, "because the people wanted my name—I thought of what we had lost—Now —now——" her voice broke off.

"Now you are mine," said Pahlen, suddenly. "Dear, the Cossacks are crossing the river; we must go into the town."

She looked up, met his gaze, and the blood rushed into her pale face. The future, which her grief had made her forget, suddenly appealed to her thoughts. It was dark, uncertain; and she dared not take the hand that she knew was held out for hers.

"I will go to Gallicia!" she said, with deep pathos. "There—there I can hide from the world."

"My arms would hide you, would hold you," he answered, and his lips quivered for a moment. "Dear, must we part?"

She met his gaze again, and their eyes saw into each other's soul. Then hers sank before his.

"Yes," she said, faintly.

"But you love me!" he said, with passion.

"Look!" she answered, and her tone wrung his heart. "Look." Her hand was held out. "See, there in my palm I hold your life. I bought

it. Nothing can take it from me. It is mine. And so—you—you whom I saved from death—your honour and your name are high things to me—and since that other life lies across our path—I shall go to the home my father left me. But all the world save one shall think I am your wife—only it must believe also that we hate each other and so live apart."

His face quivered with pain. For a moment he would have pleaded with her, but her eyes and his own contrition kept him silent.

"I have brought this on you!" was all he could say.

"No!" her voice grew clear and sweet. "Not you. It was a hard thing for a soul to face its ruin. It has passed. And now death and life bind us together—hereafter——" she stopped, her words died away, the tears flooded and fell once more from her eyes.

He placed his arms about her; they read again each other's heart; their lips met, then she broke from him.

The clatter and jingle of accoutrements drew near. A party of Cossacks were entering the village, waving their whips as they cantered forward. Seeing Pahlen they rode towards him; their faces fierce and eager under their tall astrachan caps. The *Esaoul* or captain of the troop stared at him.

"What! is it you, guardsman!" he exclaimed. "Why, we left you dead by the wayside. You remember me? Murat's camp—that night—the snow! I got away from the French, and back to my men in time for Eylau. Oh, it was a battle! We cut two French divisions in pieces. We are merry enough now in Königsberg. The Emperor and the Prussian king are there."

"And all the Emperor's court?" said Pahlen, speaking eagerly, his tone anxious and bitter.

"All. The losses of Eylau have been cast into the shade in its opinion by the death of Prince Volkonsky's wife. You have seen her? A beautiful woman. Fever and grief for a

brother killed at Eylau carried her off. Every one is talking of her death and pitying her husband. The minister is distracted, and his Majesty has been most gracious to him."

A light gathered in Pahlen's eyes; death can be merciful to the living sometimes.

"The Countess and I are going into Königsberg," he said. "We have had a narrow escape from the French."

The *Esaoul* raised his cap. "This lady——"

"Is my wife," answered Pahlen, in the tone of one who has been twice reprieved.

The Cossack officer bowed again, and led his men back to the huts, where the terrified Jews stood cowering by their doors. Pahlen turned to Halka.

"Come," he said, and took her hand. Her eyes sought his, frightened, inquiring.

"The life that lay across our path has gone," he said, his face grave

and tender. "We will go into Königsberg."

"And she—the Princess——?"

"Was the other," he answered, and bent and kissed her.

THE END.

THE INCOGNITO LIBRARY.

A series of small books by representative writers, whose names will for the present not be given.

In this series will be included the authorized American editions of the future issues of Mr. Unwin's "PSEUDONYM LIBRARY," which has won for itself a noteworthy prestige.

32mo, limp cloth, each 50 cents.

I. THE SHEN'S PIGTAIL, and Other Cues of Anglo-China Life, by Mr. M——.

II. THE HON. STANBURY AND OTHERS, by Two.

III. LESSER'S DAUGHTER, by Mrs. Andrew Dean.

IV. A HUSBAND OF NO IMPORTANCE, by "Rita."

V. HELEN, by Oswald Valentine.

VI. A GENDER IN SATIN, by "Rita."

VII. EVERY DAY'S NEWS, by C. E. Francis.

These will be followed by volumes by other well-known authors.